The New Criterion

December 2001

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Horse and Rider, 1902, monotype on paper, 9 × 9 inches (image)

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Notes & Comments: December 2001

The New Criterion *on art*

Although *The New Criterion* has never before published a special art section, there is a sense in which we like to think that every issue has contained one. From our first number, in September 1982, we have consistently devoted a great deal of attention to the visual arts, both to the contemporary art scene and to historical exhibitions.

From the beginning, what we have tried to offer is not simply coverage but criticism. By "criticism" we mean "discrimination," that is, informed judgments of value. The word "discrimination" has had a hard time of it in our culture lately. This is partly, of course, because of its use in the phrase "racial discrimination." By a process of linguistic seepage, heavily abetted by laziness, "discrimination" became associated with bigotry. In fact, honest discrimination is a powerful antidote to bigotry, since it subjects unconsidered judgments to the illuminations of scrutiny. It is also worth noting that discrimination is not the same thing as hostility—though it is in the nature of things that a discriminating assessment of the contemporary art world will also be, in large part, a negative assessment. How could it fail to be? For what we are talking about is a world in which chicanery, ideological grandstanding, and cynical commercialism are rampant. It says a lot about our times that, in many circles, to mention this is to be guilty of dubious taste. Though hardly creditable, this feeling is perfectly understandable. Once begun, the task of pointing out naked emperors is difficult to contain. Telling the truth is habit-forming. Who knows where it will stop?

We at *The New Criterion* have tried to help make sure that it will not stop. The last few decades have been a time of explosive activity in the art world. Whether they have also been a time of significant artistic achievement is another question. In the 1980s and 1990s, almost every established museum expanded, new museums and art galleries sprang up everywhere, the art market became a frenetic bourse, and more and more people were doing more and different things and calling them art. The effervescence has been exhilarating and bewildering by turns. Often, of course, it has been simply depressing. Mies van der Rohe may have overstated the case when he observed that "less is more." Nevertheless, one of the chief lessons of recent cultural history is that, when it comes to art, "more" is often "less": less accomplishment, less integrity, less allegiance to the aesthetic core that animates vital artistic activity.

We have tried to bear these home truths in mind as we set about the task of criticism —the task, that is to say, of discriminating

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between better and worse, success and failure. Readers who look back over our coverage of the visual arts may be surprised at how much praise our writers have bestowed on artists and exhibitions over the years. Often, to be sure, the praise has been reserved for figures and institutions that have received short or no shrift by the cheerleaders of the cultural establishment. What we have tried to promote is aesthetic achievement, not pseudo-avant-garde gestures.

The current issue offers a concentrated dose of critical thinking about art. The ten meditations on art in this issue provide a series of snapshots of the contemporary art world, which involves not simply the contemporary practice but also the contemporary exhibition and delectation of art, past as well as present. The essays touch on everything from the drawings of Pieter Bruegel to the Chelsea art scene in New York, from the achievements of the nineteenth-century American master Thomas Eakins to the legacy of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Museum of Modern Art's founding director. This issue also contains "A Malign Legacy," the fourth installment of our yearlong series "The Survival of Culture." Written by the English historian and novelist David Pryce-Jones, this essay traces the circuitous trajectory of political tyranny over the last fifty years. Political life is not the same as the life of art. Indeed, that fact is something *The New Criterion* has often insisted upon. Nevertheless, Mr. Pryce-Jones's eloquent essay, taken together with these meditations on art, reminds us that both require vigilant discrimination if they are to be seen aright—and if the survival of culture is to be more than a fond hope.

Ernst Gombrich, 1909–2001

When we ask upon what the survival of culture depends, we immediately think of those individuals whose careers exemplify the commitment to the values of high culture. It is curious to what extent the health and vibrancy of a culture depends upon the leavening activity of a few individuals. An institution, Emerson said, is but the lengthened shadow of a man. The death last month of the great art historian E. H. Gombrich provided a melancholy reminder not only of how thin the ranks of genuinely cultivated individuals have become but also to what extent the pulse of cultural life is bound up with the contributions of particular talents.

A transplanted Viennese who had lived in Britain since 1933, Gombrich was one of those individuals who become an institution. As director of the Warburg Institute in London, a post he held from 1959 to 1976, Gombrich was in the best sense what T. S. Eliot (somewhat disparagingly) had accused Matthew Arnold of being: an impresario for culture. Gombrich understood that art was indissolubly linked with the larger humanist enterprise. Hence his insistence on understanding art in the context of that rich and elusive concept: style. Style named not the external appurtenances of art but that network of inherited visual conventions in terms of which a culture pictured the world to itself. Style is not a garment that can be put on or off: it is a lens through which the visible becomes visible.

Gombrich was the author of many books, including such classics as *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960) and *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and other Essays on the Theories of Art* (1968). His abiding interest in questions of scientific methodology led him down many byways, some more profitable than others. (His fondness for the theories of Karl Popper was, we think, particularly unfortunate.) But Gombrich never lost the sense of wonder in the face of art. His most popular book was undoubtedly *The Story of Art* (1950), which sold some two million copies.

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Commissioned as a children's book, this five-hundred-page survey of Western art manages to be plainspoken but serious, simple without simplification.

What was novel about *The Story of Art* was not the tale it told. As a contribution to art history, it is essentially a rehearsal of familiar monuments. What distinguishes the book is Gombrich's passionate plea for direct, first-hand experience of works of art. "One never finishes learning about art," he wrote. "There are always new things to discover. Great works of art seem to look different each time one stands before them. They seem to be as inexhaustible and unpredictable as real human beings."

Gombrich was above all the enemy of ready-made labels and canned opinions. "There really is no such thing as Art," he wrote with provocative overstatement. "There are only artists." Like most people who are genuinely serious about art, Gombrich was quick to warn against exaggerating art's claims. "Art with a capital A," he noted, "has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish." Making too much of art has the effect of occluding, not illuminating, the work it pretends to celebrate. It was in this context that Gombrich repeatedly warned against the habit of retreating from experience through the hatch of abstraction and "long high-sounding words." Half-knowledge and snobbery, he pointed out, often brought people to the neighborhood of art while denying them admission to its riches. He speaks of people who walk through a gallery, catalogue in hand, but who look at paintings only to corroborate what is written in their trot.

> Every time they stop in front of a picture they eagerly search for its number. We can watch them thumbing their book, and as soon as they have found the title or name they walk on. They might just as well have stayed at home, for they have hardly looked at the painting. They have only checked the catalogue.

What, we wonder, would Gombrich have had to say about that recent, and powerfully effective prophylactic against first-hand aesthetic experience, the "audio tour"?

In fact, Gombrich's interest in questions of perception and optical illusion often took him quite far from the particular works of art with which he began. But his impressive learning never became a substitute for direct experience. The journeys he embarked upon were always journeys of discovery, not reference. Gombrich once wrote that he hoped to "open eyes, not loosen tongues." This he did for countless readers. His passing diminishes the culture he adorned.

The silver lining dept.

Like many cultural institutions in New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum has suffered a sharp decline in attendance since the terrorist attacks of September 11. This has had some regrettable consequences, including some planned layoffs at the museum and the postponing of a much awaited exhibition devoted to the early twentieth-century Russian abstract artist Kasimir Malevich.

But just as many a dark cloud has a silver lining, so the Guggenheim's sudden drop in customers has had at least one salutary result: the indefinite postponement of an exhibition of work by the contemporary performance and video artist Matthew Barney. Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic for *The New York Times*, has declared that Barney is "the most important American artist of his generation." But talk is cheap. Take a look at Barney's rebarbative performance pieces; then ponder what the chief art critic for our paper of record wrote. No wonder E. H. Gombrich worried about loosening tongues.

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The survival of culture: IV

A malign legacy

by David Pryce-Jones

Wherever on this planet ideals of personal freedom and dignity apply, there you will find the cultural inheritance of England.
—Karel Čapek

Most of the world for most of the time has lived under tyranny. Choice does not come into the matter. Years, centuries have to pass in order for people to be able to build the culture and supporting institutions of a democratic society—that is, one in which individuals have to be responsible for themselves and their choices. An highly complicated balance operates in a democracy between the myriad choices of individuals and the procedures of accountability they set up to adjudicate the moral, social, and political outcomes of their choices. There is no history, in Emerson's shorthand for the hard-won primacy of the individual over tyranny, only biography.

To be autobiographical, then: among my earliest memories is the exodus from Paris in June 1940 to escape the incoming German army. An image of the blurred faces of refugees along the road has stayed with me. Together with relatives, in due course I was able to leave Vichy France and cross into Spain. Many people—the German literary critic Walter Benjamin for one—were not so fortunate on that same escape route.

Grown-up, I began to come to grips with this experience. Why would unknown Germans have hunted down my relatives and my four-year-old self? How had this complete collapse of democratic France come about? I read what I could about Nazism. I spent a year in Israel, where I was able to attend the Eichmann trial, and to discover, to my surprise, that the death penalty served to protect the innocent more than to exact revenge. In Germany, I was to interview many Nazis, some of them of the highest rank, intimates of Hitler. Albert Speer was one. A day with him in his house in Heidelberg brought me to a different conclusion from that of his biographer Gitta Sereny, who believed she detected regret, if not repentance. Faced with a rerun of the past, it seemed to me, Speer would have made exactly the same choices. Power corrupts. Murder runs deep.

In the era of Brezhnev, I travelled in the Soviet Union and its satellites. In *Memoir of Hungary, 1944–1948* (2001), a wonderfully evoked work, Sandor Marai describes how his very first sighting of Red Army soldiers in Hungary during March 1944 told him that these men were not going to bring him freedom; they couldn't, because they hadn't any for themselves. So I found it. Social and cultural permafrost had set in. In the presence of KGB minders, I sat in rooms with people unable to risk the simplest human exchanges. These encounters were initiations in tyranny. I knew I was contributing entries to their secret police dossiers and mine.

My relatives had had property in Hungary, deep in the countryside. The house was

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now a tank garage. The surrounding poverty was startling. The villagers wept; they beseeched me not to forget them. One day, they said, the Soviet occupation would be over. A former farm manager poured me a drink in a glass with my family's monogram on it, and on the wall behind him hung a portrait of a lady in the splashiest fin-de-siècle style, evidently removed from my family's house. I was glad that these token things had survived. Vladimir Nabokov made the point that he hadn't minded the Communists taking away his fortune, but he did mind that they believed him to be the sort of person who would mind. I felt the same. As a boy, listening to stories of the past and looking at family photographs and my grandfather's annotated copy of the poems of Petöfi, I cherished romantic fantasies about Hungary, its beautiful country houses, and the Budapest cafes like Gerbeaud's, where the company would be the likes of Marai. More than material things, the Communists had stolen the freedom of the fully imagined life.

The Soviets had created a new type of man, it was widely held, whose identity was defined by class rather than nation. The Soviets and their satellites were also supposed to have built a socialist culture and an economy that, in the double negative of the persistent Stalinist apologist E. J. Hobsbawm, was in its own way "not unimpressive." Yet touts in the streets of Moscow would offer to buy my jeans off me. On a subway train to East Berlin, I was intrigued by the presence of a throng of young men speaking Arabic. I followed as they disappeared into the interior courtyard of a gloomy and rundown Wilhelmine block. There, in front of peddlers offering dollars, surrealistically the young men took off their trousers, and then the many sets of underpants that they had been wearing. The reality of the five-year-plan was that smugglers alone provided basic garments.

Intellectuals come out of the twentieth century wretchedly. Those in favor of Nazism, to be sure, were few and too deranged to win much acceptance. On the other hand, the huge majority of those in a position to enjoy full freedom of expression regarded Communism as a peaceful and progressive utopia, when in fact it brought murder, tyranny, and poverty. Voluntarily, intellectuals were surrendering to others the responsibility of taking choices for themselves, and accountability, too. The resulting climate of opinion, loosely wrapped up under the label of fellow-traveling, was altogether a denial of reality. All manner of people had been in the clutches of Soviet Communism and escaped to bear witness. Among them were Stalin's secretary Bazarov, Victor Serge, Anton Cilega, Franz Borkenau—truly impressive men. Systematically vilified, they were denied a hearing.

With rare exceptions, defenders of democratic freedom were too apologetic to be effective. When E. M. Forster asserted that he would rather betray his country than a friend, he was characteristically obscuring the idea of a just cause. At that point, morality begins to rot.

Messianic delusions about Communism spread throughout the educated classes with a mass credulity and self-righteousness not seen since the Middle Ages.

Motives related to fashion and careerism—and no doubt stupidity and ignorance—drove this failure of intellect. Consciously or unconsciously, there was also primary fear. Each totalitarian power evidently had an huge apparatus for war and state violence. With few exceptions, democratic politicians throughout the thirties followed policies to appease these powers. Fellow-traveling was the cultural arm of political appeasement. Far from offering any resistance, the eminent commentators of the day—the Webbs, Bernard Shaw, H. G.

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Wells—accommodated themselves to the expected totalitarian future. Trotskyists, Fabians, socialists, Bloomsburyites, pacifists, Quakers rejoiced in finding more to blame in democratic societies than in totalitarianism. Everything was the fault of the British or of other empires, the white man's prejudices, his law, or his capitalism. It is perhaps natural for many people to shirk a test of character, but here surely was also a plea for the continuation of privileges hitherto so effortlessly and pleasantly enjoyed.

Again with rare exceptions, defenders of democratic freedom were too apologetic to be effective. When E. M. Forster asserted that he would rather betray his country than a friend, he was characteristically obscuring the idea of a just cause. At that point, morality begins to rot. Quite forgotten now but a well known commentator in his day, Ramsay Muir was a decent liberal, absolutely representative in his worries, seeking to stiffen the weakening instinct for self-preservation in democratic countries. In 1934, in the aftermath of Hitler's takeover, he published a pamphlet with the title *Is Democracy A Failure*? Yes, he thought, in large states it was "a thing of yesterday," and all of us were drifting apathetically, losing the heritage of freedom our fathers had won. To ward off dictatorship he proposed to reform parliamentary procedure and introduce proportional representation, measures not likely to frighten off Hitler and Stalin. J. M. Keynes—hardly a conservative—observed in October 1939 that the left had been calling loudly for resistance to Nazism before the war. The moment war was declared, though, the left rediscovered its pacifism, to leave the fighting to "Colonel Blimp and the Old School Tie," for which Keynes called for three cheers.

It is no exaggeration to say that without Churchill democracy might well have failed in the crucial test against Nazism. As the case of France proved, appeasement slid naturally into collaboration. In 1940 the French National Assembly voted in favor of its own abolition, an act of democratic surrender without precedent. Through willpower and personal example, Churchill in person refutes the Marxist theory of historical determinism, according to which the individual has no role to play in affecting the course of events.

Without President Truman, democracy might have failed in the crucial test against Communism. At the present moment in world history, as Truman put it in his famous declaration in 1947, "nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life." One way of life was based on the will of the majority, and the other was based on the imposition of the will of the minority on the majority. Communist parties in France, Italy, Spain, and Greece were prepared to take power through revolution. Stalin's preoccupation with digesting Red Army conquests in eastern and central Europe instead took priority. Without steadfast American input and inspiration, the Soviet challenge would have been left unanswered, and western Europe would have adopted the Pétainist solution of consummating appeasement in outright collaboration.

Throughout the Cold War, the degradation of intellectuals became more and more widespread. Communists could act with barbarity anywhere in the world and be sure to find enthusiastic apologists in the West. However many millions of victims fell to Communism in Hungary, in Cuba, in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China, the Sartres and de Beauvoirs, the Lillian Hellmans and Norman Mailers, the Noam Chomskys and E. J. Hobsbawms applauded—and then accused their own democratic societies of every injustice and ill. "The white race *is* the cancer of human history," exclaimed Susan Sontag. *Between Friends* (1995) consists of the correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy. From her New York apartment or her much prized house in Castine, Maine, McCarthy imagined herself leading "Resistance" to the Vietnam War as though she were living in Vichy France. Anti-Com-

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munism seemed to her more dangerous than Communism. Law and order, she held, existed only behind the Iron Curtain. Hannah Arendt did not think that fascism would prevail in the United States but prepared nonetheless for exile in the house she had bought in Switzerland. Comic though this flight from reality might seem, many in the educated classes shared it.

Throughout the Cold War, the degradation of intellectuals became more and more widespread. Communists could act with barbarity anywhere in the world and be sure to find enthusiastic apologists in the West.

Some future Edward Gibbon will have to do justice to this abuse of privilege and dereliction of intellect.

In the sixties, a yet wider coalition assembled throughout the democratic countries of groups that resented or hated everything that had made them what they were. Most of these protesters came from comfortable and privileged backgrounds, taking for granted the freedoms they were so blithely abusing, only a collect call away from parents apparently willing to indulge them endlessly. "Counterculture" was a telling description for a nihilism that spread from pacifist flower children and hippies, to the drug-crazed disciples of Timothy Leary, to assorted terrorists, the Weathermen, the Irish Republican Army, the Baader-Meinhof gang, the Red Brigades. On the evidence, the democratic West was nurturing within itself those who would destroy it. For fear of the accusation of fascism, the governments under threat panicked, adding to their own destabilization. In fact, the terrorist groups almost without exception were armed and financed clandestinely by the Soviet Union, and were provided with safe houses and training behind the Iron Curtain. A few courageous journalists, Claire Sterling for one, gathered the evidence to that effect, only to be mocked for their "obsession" with the Cold War.

Violence—or "direct action" in the vocabulary of these groups—became counterproductive at the last minute. The murder of a range of innocent people, from security guards to businessmen and the Italian prime minister Aldo Moro, outraged the public. Though attributed to the Bulgarian secret police rather than to the KGB, the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in 1981 seems to have been the last act in this widespread campaign of destabilization. By then, the Soviet Union was discontinuing a covert policy that so many Western intellectuals were consummating for them overtly.

The work of the Foucaults, Derridas, Lacans, and the shoals of their imitators extended political fellow-traveling throughout society and its culture. The French writer Jean Sevillia coined the apt phrase "intellectual terrorism" for the title of the book he wrote about the whole development. Contempt for democratic institutions was translated into contempt for the moral values that had underpinned those institutions. Henceforth, language was to be used against itself. If words are passing fancies without correlation to reality, then there can be no such thing as truth. Moral judgments are only so much hot air, nothing is what it seems, and everything can as easily be reversed into its opposite. Thus generosity is really a selfish indulgence; love is merely possessiveness; manliness is brutality, while femininity the submission to this brutality; art becomes whatever you want it to be; freedom itself is servitude.

George Orwell had the rare imagination to foresee such inhuman inversions, but he was long since dead. The thrust has been to break down and relativize every aspect of behavior in such a manner that nobody could confidently say what is right and what is wrong. Every act became its own justification; the more violent the act, the

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greater the justification. As the criminal becomes valued, the judge and the jail warden dwindle into servants of tyranny, the policeman into a "pig." The artist or writer who produces something particularly offensive is "controversial" or "disturbing," terms implying interest and acceptance on the part of right-minded people, leaving criticism—never mind forceful rejection—to the fools. Art and literature become auction-houses in which the most extreme transgressions fetch the highest prices, and there is not even the pretence of universal values. Such is the dead end of the humanist tradition that was Europe's contribution to civilization.

The events of 1968 and their aftermath constituted nothing less than a vote of no-confidence in democracy, and this led spontaneously to what looked like a terminal appeasement of and collaboration with the Soviet Union. I heard a famous French filmmaker say, as though preaching ex cathedra, "I don't read Solzhenitsyn, he's a right-wing writer." Two generations of intellectuals had taken a hard look at the balance of forces in the world, decided that the Soviet Union weighed in as the more powerful, and determined to have a career on the winning side. People thinking of their own skins prefer to be victimizers rather than victims.

"Because the trams run on time, they think it is a normal society," was the bitter crack of Osip Mandelstam on the Communism that was to murder him—one among the tens of millions. Mikhail Gorbachev and those who elected him certainly thought it was a normal society. The veteran Andrei Gromyko characteristically announced that Gorbachev might have a nice smile but his teeth were iron. The railroad system functioned, the gulag was in good order. Gorbachev believed that Communism was perfectible through promulgation and exhortation and that his smile would prove more effective than his teeth for the purpose. Glasnost was a step in elementary truth-telling and perestroika an introduction of parliamentary representation, in however controlled a form. These reforms were enough to expose Gorbachev's notion of Communism as an illusion.

As the Soviet empire was falling, I was convinced that Gorbachev would reveal his true nature by imposing military rule, massacring thousands as an example to others, declaring a state of emergency, and instigating whatever else he might deem necessary to hold on to power, including threatening a nuclear exchange. Afterwards Gorbachev claimed that no such ideas had entered his or anyone's head. But after questioning a great many first secretaries and ideological secretaries throughout the empire, I realized that they too had expected some such major showdown. By the time the use of force became imperative for the survival of Communism, it was too late to resort to it. People had the chance to take responsibility for themselves and hold their oppressors to account. Freedom spread with the speed of a bush fire. At the fall of the Bastille, Charles James Fox had exclaimed, "How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world! And how much the best!" The breaking of Communism in an almost carnival atmosphere was an event still greater. A true believer to the end, Gorbachev did the world a service by default. It still seems to shock him that his idealization of Communism bore no relation to its reality.

With a symbolism that leaves its stamp on history, eager crowds of anonymous people broke through the Berlin Wall one night, emerging into the open like the prisoners in the last act of *Fidelio*. They had the highest expectations of the West. On a continental scale, here was the mirror-image of the moment in 1944 when Sandor Marai had looked to the arrival of Soviet soldiers for freedom. These hopefuls have been disappointed. The seventy or so years of Communism had emptied daily life in the Soviet bloc of moral content. Right and wrong had become void concepts to a population reduced to the simple purpose of survival. Now one alienated mass gazed at another. The West, it turns out, has had nothing very

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much to convey beyond an interest in material possessions: it demonstrated no great interest in the extraordinary fact that millions of people had suddenly been released from tyranny and were in urgent need of the institutions of democracy and the rule of law.

Russia has the resources to finance a society with democratic institutions. But, the few with the will for such an end lack power to do much about it. Boris Yeltsin ruled the new Russia by decree, signing perhaps as many as 15,000 a year, far too many to read, and most of them put before him by unscrupulous courtiers. The Clinton administration took at face value the assertion of Yeltsin and his entourage that the content of these decrees was in the public interest. "Go, Boris, go!" was President Clinton's advice, as though he were in a sports stadium. Yeltsin held elections, and not even the subsequent shelling of his own parliament was enough to staunch the aid and subsidies. Who knew—or cared—into whose pockets the money went?

The Europeans were wrapped in their own exclusive concerns. Through the decades since the last war, Germany and France have been trying to come to terms with the historic enmity between them. A series of treaties have brought into existence what has eventually become the European Union. The collapse of Communism and the consequent unification of the two Germanys alarmed the French President Mitterand. He believed that the only brake he could devise on future German strength was to merge the French franc and other European Union currencies with the deutsche mark. The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl agreed on the ostensible grounds that otherwise a too powerful Germany might not be responsible for its actions in the future, tempted—as two of Kohl's close aides put it—to settle relationships with their neighbors "in the traditional manner." The effort to integrate East Germany has already cost a sum in the order of a hundred billion dollars, a figure likely to double. Far from feeling grateful, half the former East Germans still hanker after Communism. Once the consequences of glasnost and perestroika were spelling the end of the Party's monopoly on power, the nomenklatura looked to its future. Claim as they might to be the vanguard of the proletariat, these people were in reality privileged thieves, living off the fat of the land, exclusive managers of state enterprises, with access to the best houses, cars, and aircraft, as well as foreign currency and travel. The one thing missing was title to the wealth they enjoyed. Privatization, they were quick to grasp, would provide them with title. They had only to devise the paperwork for conveying to themselves the public property in their hands. The era of Boris Yeltsin completed a national asset-stripping launched in the era of Gorbachev.

Year after year, auditors refuse to certify EU accounts, because too much of its budget—up to ten billion dollars a year, by some estimates—goes missing.

This gigantic redistribution of wealth has been a civilian version of wartime plundering. On the one hand, it was a bribe huge enough to buy off the nomenklatura from resorting to a widespread massacre in defence of privilege and monopoly. On the other hand, it was a continuation by other means of that same privilege and monopoly. Blatantly corrupt on behalf of himself, his family, and his cronies, Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin as his successor in a bargain that exempted him from investigation into his affairs. The stealing goes on as before. Every year tens of billions of dollars are transferred abroad illegally, and whole countries like Cyprus and Slovenia lend themselves to money-laundering. The Russian government has difficulties holding the center together, paying wages, and collecting taxes.

Thousands of secret policemen, gulag camp personnel, and mass-murderers con-

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tinue to receive pensions and wear their medals proudly. Not one has been brought to trial. To draw a line under the past, and once more to affirm the difference between right and wrong, the state ought to have initiated a judicial process for these criminals. The failure to do so leaves Communism like a virus in the blood stream. The guilty have got away with their crimes. The concept of responsible citizenship goes by default. Decades will have to pass before Russia becomes a country under the rule of law, and even then the unaddressed legacy of Communism will haunt the collective memory.

Like Communism, nationalism did not bring freedom in the twentieth century but proved another instrument in the rule of the strong over the weak. Nationalism mobilized people, and contributed to the break-up of empires, European as well as Russian. Gamal Abdul Nasser, President Suharto, Kim Il Sung, Saddam Hussein, Colonel Mengistu, Mao Tse Tung, and the rest have sought legitimacy in Communism or nationalism, or more frequently in a blend of the two doctrines that allowed them the time-honored practice of establishing themselves as undisputed tyrants. For them, the Cold War was a blessed opportunity to maneuver by playing one side against another without scruple. Taken together, these tyrants have devastated whole peoples, and with them a great part of the world's stock of civilization and culture.

Africa, the Muslim and Arab world, almost all of Asia, are in the hands of one-man or dynastic rule, tyrannies made yet worse by the modern technology that holds them implacably in place. Of the two hundred or so states in the world, nearly half are failed societies, lawless arenas of war and civil war. Some self-proclaimed Beloved Leader and President for Life plunders the national wealth, and television screens world-wide show the victims of the resulting starvation and ethnic cleansing, if not genocide. Dissidents here and there analyze truthfully the condition of their society. As a rule, only the fortunate among them are able to find refuge somewhere in the West before they are imprisoned and killed.

Escape is the final choice for the Third World masses. A multi-billion dollar industry has lately arisen of people-smugglers arranging for an extortionate price clandestine journeys to faraway places. In their millions, the poor and desperate are on the move. Sometimes their corpses are found suffocated in the heavy-duty vehicles in which they were hiding to cross frontiers, or washed up from unseaworthy boats onto Mediterranean beaches. In their failed societies, there is no intimation of how some political process might start that would give these victimized people a better choice or some say in deciding their fate.

The 1968 generation is now in power throughout the West. President Clinton dodged the Vietnam draft but did not inhale his marijuana joints. Prime Minister Blair explains, "I am a modern man. I am part of the rock-and-roll generation: the Beatles, color TV." A high proportion of his cabinet, including himself, belonged to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and opposed the stationing of NATO cruise missiles in Europe. The French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was a Trotskyite activist and anti-American agitator. Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister, was a left-wing extremist, closely associated with terrorists and photographed at the time attacking policemen. Daniel Cohn-Bendit came to prominence for his leadership in the Paris rioting of 1968, and is now a member of the European parliament. What these contemporaries have in common is a self-righteous certainty that the world begins anew with them, that they know all that's worth knowing, and therefore whatever they do is virtuous by definition.

High culture once vitalized the necessary link between freedom and the institutions guaranteeing that freedom. Replacing high culture, contemporary popular culture has instead introduced the debased belief that freedom is only "doing your thing," detached from morality and even more remote

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from the institutions that protect morality. President Clinton, to give the outstanding example, disgraced his office. Any previous president would have resigned in the wake of revelations about his relationship with a young intern and his public lies about it.

To complete the comparison with the former Soviet Union, the Commissioners and their bureaucrats award themselves huge salaries, allowances, expenses, subsidized food and drink, and all tax free. Absolute power is corrupting absolutely once more.

Clinton ignored the moral dimension, and the public humored him as though he were a wayward teenager. Clinton seems set to enter the history books as a moral curiosity. His conduct damaged himself, and by association his party, in the subsequent election, rather than the office of presidency. American democracy, in other words, still retains sufficient vitality to overcome the personal defects of those who represent it.

In Europe, the Sixties generation is attempting to consummate a process begun half a century ago, namely the construction of a transnational and ultimately federal union. The United States has backed the construction of such a Europe since its inception. A federal Europe, it was safely assumed, would be the Siamese twin of a federal United States, all the more valuable an ally as a bloc than individual states. The reality is turning out very differently. Henry Kissinger is only one among a number of influential voices now warning that the emergence of a unified Europe is "one of the most revolutionary events of our time." There were always some Europeans ungrateful that America rescued them from Nazism and Communism, and others who suffered from an assortment of superiority or inferiority complexes. Subterranean resentments of the kind are now evolving into an ideology that pits the European Union against the United States in another bipolar world. Just as the Soviet bloc fragmented after the collapse of Communism, so now the democratic world is sundering.

In contrast to the American precedent in the eighteenth century, this European federation of states has grown opportunistic step by opportunistic step, as its leaders seized every opportunity to promote their project. The fifteen constituent members are due to take in another twelve countries, including Greek Cyprus (at the expense of Turkey), Malta, and countries in central and eastern Europe right up to the Ukrainian and Russian borders. Whatever the intentions of the European founding fathers, further treaties in recent years have endowed the European Union with the clear contours of empire.

In Brussels, its capital, the EU today has a bewildering structure in which there is no link between its institutions and the freedom they are supposed to ensure. At the apex are a president and twenty commissioners, appointed to office by national governments in a process invisible to the public. Not elected, they cannot be dismissed. The commission, and its subordinate councils of ministers drawn from national countries, have executive and legislative powers, and some judicial ones as well. These politicians are accountable to nobody but themselves. Here is the only legislative body in the democratic world that meets and deliberates in secret. A European court of justice was established with the political mission of granting legal force to the commission's work; its members are also appointed and may not be removed; there is no right of appeal. Commission and court combine to impose throughout the continent whatever they decree. A variety of instruments are available, including regulations that are binding, directives open to interpretation, recommendations, opinions, and resolutions.

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Nearly 30,000 civil servants are employed, spread over two-hundred buildings, with no fewer than seven-hundred standing committees. The paperwork is overwhelming. Already in force, something in the order of 80,000 resolutions have changed the daily routines and realities in every sphere of work and play in Europe. The so-called European parliament of more than six-hundred members is a token with no legislative or revisory powers. No speech there may last more than two minutes.

Empire-building is far advanced. The commission collects taxes and wants more. A European central bank exists, with the euro as common currency for the majority of members. A Growth and Stability Pact supposedly prevents one country from borrowing or incurring debts that the others will have to pay. There is a European defense force, and a police force, Europol, with powers of arrest and deportation not answerable to habeas corpus. A European legal code is forming. An immense range of goods and services and industries has been centralized and homogenized—in the cases of agriculture and fishery with disastrous commercial and ecological effects for producers and consumers everywhere in the continent.

Government now concerns itself with whole areas of public and private life where by common consent it has had no previous business. Some of these are no less onerous because absurd. Committees have been discussing the permissibility of British milk chocolate for thirty years; deciding on the circumference of home-grown peaches; contemplating which variety of tree may be planted on road verges. As European and national regulations gather into an avalanche, nothing is too trivial to escape attention. Without a specific license, as one critic has pointed out, a rural property owner in Britain "is not allowed to build a house, convert a barn, fell a wood, plant a copse, sow a field of corn, breed a calf, catch a trout, dredge a pond, move a footpath, drill an oil well or alter a hedge line." A joyless gray pall of uniformity is squeezing out the choices and energies of hitherto free people.

The experiment runs counter to the historic thrust of democracy. The central institution of democracy has been the nation-state, and Nazism and Communism consequently made sure to attack it. Imperfect as it often was in relation to minorities within its borders, the nation-state brought together and enfranchised populations under the rule of law, thus defining their identity. Sovereignty was genuine in the sense that it was a two-way contract whereby citizens fulfilled their social responsibilities under the law because they had had a say in choosing those acting in their name. In perhaps unwitting or unconscious emulation of Nazism and Communism, the commission in Brussels is deconstructing the nation-state, draining the meaning out of national identity, destroying the sovereignty without which obedience to the law of the land becomes derelict. Parliamentary proceedings are everywhere reduced to rubber-stamping the tide of regulation and decree sweeping in from Brussels. Except under duress in Vichy in 1940, there is no previous example of elected parliamentarians surrendering of their own free will the duty of representation that their own electors granted them.

An alternative sovereignty is under construction, one that requires a European identity. There is no such thing, never has been, nor could there be, granted the differences in languages, religion, law, and national histories. The past and its achievements, both good and bad, are vanishing. In the wisecrack of a character in a Tennessee Williams play, "Europe is just a fire-sale." In the absence of any non-residual traces of high culture, the commission is spending huge sums concocting the new fictitious identity, complete with what are known as European values, which turn out to be fantasies about Charlemagne or a common popular culture. On inspection this proves a matter of soccer matches, transnational golf teams, and pop concerts. Social or cultural unity is at the level pre-

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scribed by the Beatles: "All you need is love."

The EU is best described as a command-bureaucracy, and as such it is a mutation of previous totalitarian systems. It pays the usual lip-service to human rights but has already passed, or is in the process of passing, decrees that will outlaw political parties opposed to it, and that will constrain freedom of speech. In Austria, Jörg Haider's Freedom Party has rather mild reservations about the EU, but its success in a free election provoked the EU as a whole to boycott Austria. As one among many confusing features of the system, each country has its turn setting the European agenda. It was Sweden's turn when Haider was elected, and its then prime minister Goran Persson led the pack on the grounds that Austria was "out of line with EU values." Critics of the EU have already been penalized by laws concerning blasphemy. Bland words about human rights cloak a formidable machinery for future coercion and repression.

Totalitarian systems exist to privilege those who run them. The EU is no exception. Kohl and Mitterand oversaw the treaties that finalized the empire-building. In pursuit of their political goals, they engaged in all manner of illegal deals and payments that somehow escape full investigation. President Chirac of France claims that his status permits him not to answer charges of corruption. Roland Dumas, the head of the French constitutional court, no less, has been found guilty of bribery and corruption. An astonishing range of French, Italian, and Spanish politicians and their business associates have been charged with corruption, and a few are even in prison. Year after year, auditors refuse to certify EU accounts, because too much of its budget —up to ten billion dollars a year, by some estimates—goes missing. So great are the vested interests that a blind eye is turned to all manner of fraud and malpractice, even when identified in the media. To complete the comparison with the former Soviet Union, the commissioners and their bureaucrats award themselves huge salaries, allowances, expenses, subsidized food and drink—all tax free. Absolute power once more is corrupting absolutely. None of the statesmen or public servants of pre-1914 Europe would have considered, let alone actually profited from, any such plundering of the public purse.

Machiavelli wrote that "principalities are liable to danger when they are passing from the civil to the absolute order of government." It may be that people will rise up as their forebears did in defence of the institutions embodying the freedom for which they once fought, and trample down the command-bureaucracy now enveloping them. Confident in its Sixties-style self-righteousness, the EU leadership appears unaware that it is fostering the malign nationalism that it supposedly exists to cure. Opinion polls in every European country reflect a rising sense of dismay and outrage. Norwegians, Danes, Irish, and the Swiss have voted against further integration. Germany pays by far the largest net contribution to the EU budget, with the result that Germans see themselves obliged to carry other people towards whom they have no obligation. No German leader has ever risked a vote or referendum on the subject, out of well-founded fear that the result might blow apart the EU.

The European president, Romano Prodi (against whom corruption charges were levelled in his native Italy), has complained that alienation from the EU is "a malaise that affects people in all states," but in the next breath adds that "The objective of an enlarged Europe must be realized." In response to reasoned objections, Wim Duisenburg, head of the European Central Bank, spoke for the nomenklatura: "I hear but I do not listen." At a moment when Denmark rejected the euro in a referendum, it was Belgium's turn to set the European agenda, and its foreign minister Louis Michel gave a definitive statement of the consideration Brussels has for public opinion. "I personally think it's very dangerous to organize referendums when

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you're not sure you're going to win them. If you lose it that's a big problem for Europe." Insulated from reality, these would-be absolute rulers are offering people the choice between submission and a revolution likely to have the form of a nationalist—even a fascist—backlash.

Between the wars, the Czech writer Karel Čapek visited Britain to write a book, published shortly before his death at a time when the Germans marched into Prague. "Wherever on this planet ideals of personal freedom and dignity apply," he wrote, "there you will find the cultural inheritance of England." This was once a judgment common to Britain's friends, as well as to opponents of its ideals of freedom and dignity. Now the British must look to themselves to weigh the value of this inheritance, which amounts to deciding what kind of people they are. Their culture provides little help. The political and intellectual elite —heirs of E. M. Forster and Ramsay Muir —has long since accepted that right and wrong are relative, neither absolute nor worth fighting for. Britain has already handed jurisdiction of its affairs in many fields to the commission in Brussels. Decisions affecting its social, commercial, and business interests, even its defence and foreign policy, are now taken abroad by people of other nationalities. In several areas, European law takes precedence over British law.

Opinion polls in Britain, however, show the picture of a rising majority against the EU, with a fast-growing minority who wish to repatriate the powers handed over to Brussels and to quit the EU altogether. Historical experience has bred deep in the bone the Churchillian sense that they have to go it alone—against the whole continent if need be, as so often before—on the grounds that it is better to be poor but free than rich and not responsible for yourself. When Tony Blair won the 1997 election, one of his closest cabinet associates (later disgraced for corruption) warned that "the era of representative democracy may be coming to an end." Blair believes that he will be able to persuade the British to redefine the independence and freedom they have for so long taken for granted and acquiesce in full political and economic integration with the EU. It would be an ironic coda to a long and on the whole successful history if the prime minister who could so recast British identity were to be rewarded with the presidency of Europe.

The suicide attacks of September 11 on the United States served to rally democratic states, postponing any sundering into potentially divided blocs, at least for the short term. Affirming that Britain stood "shoulder to shoulder" with the United States, Blair at once provided military support. Other European countries have preferred to remain spectators cheering from the grandstand. When the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi stated the obvious—that Western civilization might in some ways be better than Islam because it is more free—he was forced to backpedal all round for what the British Home Secretary called "offensive, inappropriate and culturally inaccurate remarks." Moral relativism bears such fruit.

Islamic extremists have proved themselves the latest in the series of external enemies of democracy capable of doing great damage. Their primary strategic objective is to replace targeted regimes in the Muslim and Arab world, and no mechanism exists for the purpose except force. In the event that Islamic extremists were to seize power, one absolute system would replace another, in the manner of Ayatollah Khomeini's coup against the former Shah of Iran. So multiple are the motives and emotions in play that the focus of the threat is variable. For a long time now, Muslims have been encountering the West with ambivalence. On the one hand, the West brings material wealth, medicine, education, communications. On the other, these desirable things call into question the Muslim order that does not deliver them. An intolerable sense of humiliation and impotence arises. Opposed as they are in their declared view

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of what a Muslim state ought to be, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden deploy the same vocabulary of Western "arrogance" and a countervailing need to rescue Muslim honor and pride. Within this framework jostles an immense range of age-old sectarian, ethnic, and tribal struggles, each with its appeal to ancestral loyalties.

The United States appears to influence or to block any outcome of these various regional struggles that would favor extremists, whether Islamic or secular. What looks to the West like the hindrance of civil war and the pursuit of stability looks to the extremists like the wanton frustration of their political ambitions. The more incomplete this perception of reality, the more Islam becomes a fulfilling identity for the extremists, a call for mobilization, and the unfailing source of fanaticism and hate. So they strike at the United States as a tactic in the strategy of reclaiming the whole Muslim world.

In terms of numbers and weaponry, Islamic extremists are not the Red Army. In terms of politics, though, they are quite as baleful as the Soviet Union. As usual, murder runs deeps. Their absolute hostility to America presents the Muslim world with difficult, polarizing choices: whether to be for or against the war on terror; whether to prevaricate or to dissemble in the old nonaligned game of saying one thing and doing another; whether to play both sides off against each other. In short, the Muslim world must decide whether democracy and Islam are two beautiful but incompatible ideals. The Cold War lasted for a good four decades, and during its course countries shifted allegiance one way and the other. Should the war on terror extend over a period of years, any country that already faces an extremist challenge—Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt—risks civil war and collapse. Profit and loss considerations might also impel a country that is anti-American by definition—Iran, Iraq, Syria—to recalculate. Opportunists are many, but those who prefer to end on the losing side are few and far between.

It is time to reappraise the climate of defeatism and guilt that intellectuals have spread so far and wide throughout the West. Some still do so, continuously alienated from their own civilization and its values. Whatever contempt they feel for themselves and the democracy in which they live and work, though, none go so far as to advocate the adoption of a Taliban regime, as their forerunners in the Thirties used to agitate on behalf of the Soviet system. Terror and terror-states challenge even the most self-righteous among us.

A new organizing principle is emerging. The Anglo-American concept of freedom is incompatible with the Islamic conception of freedom put forward by Muslim extremists. Compromise is impossible between absolutism and democracy, between the state's imposed decree and the individual's need to be responsible for himself. What is freedom to the Muslim extremists looks in the West like subjection and slavery. People everywhere will be compelled to decide what exactly freedom means to them. To refer again to Truman, nations must choose between alternative ways of life. Here is the making of another Cold War, to be waged across an ideological divide. It is a measure of geopolitical change that Russia in this new perspective is an ally of democracy.

Resolve, the will to see things through to a right ending, is the end-product of the choices of the millions of individuals whose biographies make up the culture and the identity of a democratic state. Unquantifiable and fashion-tossed as resolve may be, the survival of the culture depends on it.

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The man who created MOMA

by Hilton Kramer

A work of art is an infinitely complex focus of human experience. The mystery of its creation, its history, and the rise and fall of its esthetic, documentary, sentimental, and commercial values, the endless variety of its relationships to the other works of art, its physical condition, the meaning of its subject, the technique of its production, the purpose of the man who made it—all these factors lie behind a work of art, converge upon it, and challenge our powers of analysis and publication. And they should be made accessible to other scholars and intelligible to the man off the street.

—Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 1946

Of the many museums that were founded in the United States in the course of the last century, none has exerted a greater influence on public taste, on American intellectual life, and on the life of art itself than the Museum of Modern Art, which made its debut in New York in 1929 under the directorship of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. With one exception, moreover—the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., founded by Duncan Phillips in 1921—none was so clearly the creation of a single governing intelligence.[1] The ideas and the aesthetic judgments that shaped the formation of MOMA in the early decades of its existence were primarily Barr's. They were the ideas and judgments of a man who was not yet thirty years old when the museum opened its doors to a wary, uninformed public in the first year of the Wall Street crash.

In his own generation, the young Alfred Barr was uncommonly well-prepared to undertake the daunting task that had been offered to him. His intellectual history actually began in high school when, as Sybil Gordon Kantor writes in her forthcoming biography, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*,[2] "Barr's interest in history was already piqued . . . when his Latin teacher, William Serer Rusk, awarded him Henry Adams's *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* as a prize." It was in his sophomore year at Princeton, however, in Charles Rufus Morey's course in medieval art, that Barr decided on a career in art scholarship.

> Morey's teaching methods prompted Barr's interest in the sources, patterns, chronology, and spread of a style—an approach that he would apply to modern art, first in his teach-

1 The same might be said of the Barnes Foundation, founded by Albert C. Barnes in Merion, Pennsylvania, in 1925, but for one crucial difference: the Barnes Foundation was specifically created to function as a school, not a museum. Its subsequent transformation into a public art museum, resulting from dubious court decisions, openly contravened its founder's purposes and program.

2 *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, by Sybil Gordon Kantor; The MIT Press, 472 pages $39.95. Postponed from November, it is now expected to be published in March.

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ing modernism at Wellesley in 1926–1927, and then in the very structure of the Museum of Modern Art and its multidepartmental organization. Barr later attributed his famous 1929 plan for the establishment of the various curatorial departments at the Museum of Modern Art to Morey's course.

After Princeton, in his graduate studies at Harvard with Paul J. Sachs—himself a collector and connoisseur—the now legendary Museum Course gave Barr his first practical training in the aesthetic and administrative aspects of museum work. It was a mark of Sachs's esteem for Barr that he also provided him with the funds he needed for further study in Europe.

Modern art was not yet, of course, an accepted subject for study in the universities. The pioneering course in modern art that Barr initiated at Wellesley is said to be the first of its kind in the American academy. It became a subject of lively public discussion when Barr's remarkably comprehensive "Modern Art Questionnaire"—an entrance exam he devised to screen students for his Wellesley course—was published in its entirety as a feature in *Vanity Fair*, a magazine then widely read in literary and art circles.

By the time he came to occupy the first directorship of the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, Barr had succeeded in establishing himself as the country's leading authority on the modern movements in both Europe and the United States. From the outset, his approach to the study and presentation of modernism was wide-ranging and ecumenical. It went beyond painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts to embrace architecture, industrial design, theater, movies, and, at least in principle, literature and music. Thus, among the subjects to be identified in his "Modern Art Questionnaire," which was an inquiry into what we should now call cultural literacy, were James Joyce and Arnold Schönberg as well as Henri Matisse and Frank Lloyd Wright—though not, oddly, either T. S. Eliot or Pablo Picasso. But then, the fame already enjoyed by Eliot and Picasso may have disqualified them for the purposes of the questionnaire as too easy.

Barr's ecumenical view of modernism was similarly to be observed in the concentration he lavished upon painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts, which inevitably, then as now, have been MOMA's central focus. This was a more unorthodox approach to modernist art in the early decades of the twentieth century than it may appear to be today, for we are all now, albeit in varying degrees, ecumenical in our understanding of what constitutes modernism in the visual arts. In the United States no less than in Europe, however, every avant-garde movement tended to be absolute in its dismissal of aesthetic alternatives. In Paris, the Surrealists regarded Matisse as a bourgeois lightweight, while the votaries of pure abstraction looked with horror upon the literary and erotic subject matter of the Surrealists. And in New York in the 1930s, the first decade of MOMA's existence, the art scene was deeply riven by a political as well as an aesthetic factionalism. The political left favored social realism, the populists promoted regionalism, aesthetic conservatives condemned every deviation from the conventions of realism while the underdog abstractionists struggled against all of these currents to establish their aesthetic validity.

It was Barr's distinction that as MOMA's first director he refused to be drawn into this factional warfare, preferring instead to search out aesthetic merit and historical significance in whichever variety of modernist endeavor he encountered. From his study trips abroad in the 1920s he was already well-versed in the politics as well as the aesthetics of the principal avant-garde movements in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Russia. Indeed, he witnessed at firsthand the political suppression of modernist art first in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and then in Nazi Germany in the early 1930s, and wrote eloquently about these baleful developments at the time. In politics he remained an old-fashioned liber-

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al, as immune to every totalitarian temptation as he was to the absolutism which virtually every faction of the avant garde made claim to.

In 1949, in a contribution to a symposium on "The State of American Art," Barr made a clear statement of his liberal distaste for what he dubbed the "battle of styles." Observing that "Abstraction and realism are crude and ambiguous terms but they have a present usefulness as indications of polarity," he issued a salutary warning against the politicization of art which had again become an issue in the late 1940s, owing to some stupid Congressional denunciations of modernism as "Bolshevik."

> An actual "battle of styles," as for instance between realism and abstraction, is desirable only to those who thrive on a feeling of partisanship. Both directions are valid and useful—and freedom to produce them and enjoy them should be protected as an essential liberty. There are, however, serious reasons for taking sides when one kind of art or another is dogmatically asserted to be the only funicular up Parnassus or, worse, when it is maliciously attacked by the ignorant, the frightened, the priggish, the opportunistic, the bigoted, the backward, the vulgar or the venal. Then those who love art or spiritual freedom cannot remain neutral.

For his rejection of political attacks on modernism, Barr won much praise, of course, in the liberal press. But for his refusal to be drawn into the aesthetic factionalism of the art world, Barr was roundly attacked by all sides. Lincoln Kirstein denounced him and MOMA itself for promoting the work of Matisse, of all people, and Clement Greenberg criticized him for his allegedly laggard support of the Abstract Expressionists, while Meyer Schapiro condemned what he characterized as Barr's "essentially unhistorical" account of the origins of abstract art.[3] Yet in retrospect Barr's disinterested and unhurried concentration on aesthetic achievement in a wide range of modernist art proved to be a key to MOMA's success in creating the single greatest collection of modern art in the world. This was itself a considerable intellectual feat.

Yet it is one of the curiosities of Barr's pivotal career—a career largely responsible for establishing modern art as a subject for serious critical and institutional attention in this country—that he has rarely, if ever, been acknowledged to have made a major contribution to American intellectual life. This is owing, in part, to the fact that for much of the twentieth century, the principal chroniclers of American intellectual life did not take much of an interest in the visual arts. But it also has something to do with Barr's lifelong refusal to become a public personality. Both in his voluminous writings on art and in his public statements about the place of art in our democratic culture, he was seen—by his own design—to be speaking for the museum rather than for himself. And as he was neither an academic nor a journalist nor a charismatic public speaker, it rarely occurred to the chroniclers of twentieth-century intellectual life to accord Barr any attention in their historical surveys of its achievements. More often than not, it was Barr's critics in the academy and in the press who were assumed to occupy the intellectual high ground—and thus worthy of historical analysis—while Barr himself was relegated to the faceless ranks of the museum bureaucrats. It didn't help matters, either, that no collection of his

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3 Meyer Schapiro's criticism of Barr was occasioned by the latter's catalogue essay for one of the most important exhibitions in MOMA's early history, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936). Writing as a Marxist in those days, Schapiro decried Barr's refusal to discuss the social and political aspects of abstract art. Yet Barr himself had already addressed those issues in his early writings: see, for example, "The LEF and Soviet Art," published in *Transition* in 1928 and reprinted in *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings*. For my own analysis of Schapiro's political perspective on modern painting, see "The 'Apples' of Meyer Schapiro," in *The Twilight of the Intellectuals* (1999).

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writings on art was published in his lifetime. The splendid volume called *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, edited by Irving Sandler and Amy Newman, was published posthumously in 1986, five years after Barr's death.

Given this curious history, in which Barr's achievements have somehow been allowed to eclipse our understanding of the man himself, the publication of Ms. Kantor's intellectual biography must be considered something of an event. For this is the first extended account we have been given of Alfred Barr as an intellectual force not only in the art world but also in the larger cultural life of his time. Its focus is emphatically upon ideas and their consequences rather than on the private life of its subject. It examines the conflicts, both personal and institutional, which strongly held beliefs are bound to generate in the arena of cultural debate, but this is not the kind of biography that goes on the prowl for scandal or psychoanalytic revelation. This is not to say that Barr fails to emerge as a distinct personality in this book. Far from it. Ms. Kantor concentrates on character, intellectual development, and the acquisition of skills —in Barr's case, not only the critical skills needed for making a wide range of difficult and often controversial aesthetic judgments, but also the political and diplomatic skills essential to professional survival in a milieu as highly charged with oversize egos, big money, conflicting tastes, contending ideas, and the fierce competition for power, influence, and preferment, as MOMA was in the first decade of its existence.

That Barr succeeded for as long as he did in imposing his vision of modernism, which was essentially but not exclusively the vision of an aesthetic formalist, is an amazing story, and Ms. Kantor tells it well within the limits of the scope of her study. For this intellectual biography comes to an end in 1943 when Barr was precipitously fired by the chairman of MOMA's board of trustees, Stephen Clark. As Ms. Kantor writes:

> Barr had been having difficulties for the preceding six years on a variety of fronts: his tastes were running ahead of the trustees, his writings were always behind schedule, and, in the area of administration (which he disliked), competing forces were undercutting his efforts. . . . His enemies ranged over a broad front of staff members, hostile critics of modern art in general, or adherents of one mode of art or another.

Barr had never been physically robust, and he was increasingly subject to nervous collapses, insomnia, and other ills of the body and spirit. Yet he faced down his adversaries in the museum and outside the museum with an extraordinary display of tenacity and conviction. Although he had been fired from the directorship of the museum, he refused to acknowledge that he had been booted out of the museum itself. He continued to turn up at his office and pursue his curatorial tasks. Without fanfare or argument—never mind such a thing as a lawsuit—he simply stayed on and on, continuing to meet his writing commitments, advising on acquisitions and exhibitions until, amazingly enough, in 1944 he was appointed chairman of MOMA's Modern Painting and Sculpture department, which had always been his principal interest anyway.

There are, of course, many ways to write the history of modern art, and one of the most important, certainly, is to write its intellectual history. It is to the intellectual history of modern art that *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* makes an indispensable contribution. It is also timely, for with MOMA currently undertaking the largest expansion in its history, Ms. Kantor's disabused account of its past gives us a needed perspective from which to judge the museum's future.

About the future of MOMA we can only speculate, of course, but certain auguries have already alerted us to what might be expected of the greatly expanded MOMA that awaits us. One, certainly, was the break with MOMA's past—in effect, a decisive rejection

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of Alfred Barr's carefully formulated conception of modernism—that was mounted in the series of exhibitions and catalogues called "MOMA2000" (October 1999–January 2001).[4] An even earlier augury was the publication of *A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern* (1990) by Kirk Varnedoe, the current director of MOMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture, which grandly promised to bring us "an entirely new vision of modern art's origins and its subsequent meanings." Still further portents may be found in the kind of changes in programs and exhibitions that have lately been attempted in a number of other museums ostensibly devoted to modern and contemporary art—at Tate Modern in London, for example, and at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Notwithstanding certain differences in emphasis and in sheer intellectual competence, what all of these developments have in common are some sweepingly revisionist attitudes toward art and history: 1) a distaste for the fundamentals of historical chronology; 2) a refusal to accord the aesthetics of style a priority over the subject matter or "content" of works of art; 3) a bias that favors tendentious sociology at the expense of connoisseurship; and 4) an appetite for populist appeal. It is this nexus of ideas and attitudes that united such otherwise disparate exhibitions as "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture," which Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik organized at MOMA in 1990, as well as large tracts of "MOMA2000," "The American Century" at the Whitney Museum, "Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis" at Tate Modern, and the Guggenheim's ill-fated turn to exhibiting motorcycles, haute couture, and the pictures of Norman Rockwell.

All but the Rockwell exhibition have been large and ambitious projects, encompassing hundreds of objects and occupying vast quantities of exhibition space as well as many hundreds of pages of catalogue text. They have been hugely expensive, too. Yet their net effect has been to render the aesthetic history of modern art incomprehensible to anyone coming to them without a firm command of the subject. Intellectually, they represent the same corruption of scholarship that has led to the teaching of art history in the universities as, in effect, a branch of the social sciences. For a broad public—Barr's "man off the street"—they virtually guarantee historical confusion and a corruption of taste. That some of these monster exhibitions have been box-office hits is not surprising. To package art for the public on the basis of its alleged subject matter is always an easier "sell" than an attempt to instruct the public in aesthetic distinctions, for it turns every work of art into an easily apprehended illustration of something other than itself. Yet if the term "modernism" in art is to mean anything other than a strictly period classification of objects, an aesthetic comprehension of the art object itself and its relations to other objects of a similar class must be seen to be central to our experience of the art. When such objects are presented to us as illustration, however, it is no wonder that museums are tempted to embrace authentic illustration—e.g., Norman Rockwell—as a substitute for the real thing. As H. L. Mencken famously said, no one has ever lost money underestimating the intelligence of the American people.

Alfred Barr's conception of modernism, in his installations of MOMA's great collections and in many of the museum's major exhibitions during his tenure, provided a coherent account of both the master currents of modern art and its minor tributaries. It was a conception that was bound to be modified, augmented, or otherwise revised in the course of time, especially in relation to subsequent developments in modern art itself and in the

4 For two views of "MOMA2000," see Karen Wilkin's "Rethinking modernism" in *The New Criterion* (January 2000) and my own essay "Telling stories, denying style: reflections on 'MOMA2000'" in *The New Criterion* (January 2001).

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literature of criticism and scholarship that they have generated. Yet none of the attempts to overturn the basic tenets of Barr's conception of the aesthetic and intellectual morphology of modernism have proved to be persuasive. Kirk Varnedoe's attempt to provide "an entirely new vision of modern art's origins" foundered on the debacle of "High and Low," while Robert Storr's attempt to rewrite the history of modernism in the section of "MOMA2000" called "Modern Art Despite Modernism" was obliged to ignore the fact that much of what he was concerned to reclaim for modernism had long before been encompassed by Barr's ecumenical embrace of modernism's diversity of style. Even worse, the decision to deny the history of abstract art a section of its own in "MOMA2000" and then consign actual examples of abstraction to various categories of subject matter—thus once again demoting abstract art to the realm of illustration—meant that the public for Barr's 1936 exhibition of "Cubism and Abstract Art" was in a better position to understand the aesthetics of abstraction than the much larger public for "MOMA-2000" two-thirds of a century later.

The truth is, the greatest monographic exhibitions at MOMA in recent decades—among them the 1980 Picasso retrospective organized by William Rubin, the 1992 Matisse retrospective organized by John Elderfield, and the current retrospective devoted to Alberto Giacometti—have all had a close kinship to Barr's pioneering exhibitions. Yet at a press briefing in November for MOMA's forthcoming *Matisse Picasso* exhibition in 2003, neither Glen Lowry, MOMA's current director, nor either of the MOMA curators involved in the organization of this big show—Kirk Varnedoe and John Elderfield—thought it appropriate to make a single reference to the definitive exhibitions and scholarly monographs that Barr devoted to Matisse and Picasso during his long association with the museum. They spoke of MOMA's longstanding commitment to the achievements of Matisse and Picasso, but of the man who initiated, nurtured, and institutionalized that commitment they said nothing. For some of us in the audience at that press briefing, this startling omission said more about MOMA's current attitude towards its own history than anything that was actually said about the forthcoming exhibition.

About what the new mammoth MOMA now under construction will bring—it is expected to open in 2005—we hear many things, and we can hope that some of them are true. One is that "MOMA2000" will *not* be a model for the reinstallation of the museum's permanent collection. That would be good news, indeed. But we also hear that the entire first floor of MOMA's expanded quarters will be devoted to contemporary art, and if true this is not such good news. For in practice—if the present and the recent past are any guide to the future—this is likely to mean a wholesale transfer of the contents of the more trendy galleries in Chelsea to MOMA's midtown facilities. And the present is not, after all, a period that has produced artists who can be claimed to rank with the masters of modernism. Even the few exceptions to this judgment that come to mind are not, for the most part, the artists in whom MOMA's curators take much of an interest. The very thought of a mammoth new exhibition space devoted to the overscale detritus of a post-Duchampian folly and its allegedly "postmodern" explorations of "transgressive" subjects is chilling.

My own guess is that what MOMA will do best in the future is what it has done best in the past: pay homage to the masters of modernist achievement, and thus face up to the fact that its principal mission lies in sustaining the tradition that it did so much to establish. And in the execution of that mission, the challenge will still be to meet the standards of the man who created MOMA.

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Wrong turns
by Roger Kimball

Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. . . . It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic.
—Marcel Duchamp, 1946

INANE *adj. Lacking sense or substance; empty.*
—The American Heritage Dictionary

The most delicious news to emerge from the art world this year came in October, courtesy of the BBC. Under the gratifying headline "Cleaner Dumps Hirst Installation," the world read that

> A cleaner at a London gallery cleared away an installation by artist Damien Hirst having mistaken it for rubbish. Emmanuel Asare came across a pile of beer bottles, coffee cups and overflowing ashtrays and cleared them away at the Eyestorm Gallery on Wednesday morning.

I hope that Mr. Asare was immediately given a large raise. Someone who can make mistakes like that is an immensely useful chap to have about. In fact, I would hereby like to suggest that he be taken on by some eminent London newspaper—*The Times*, say, or *The Daily Telegraph*—as an art critic. The military has special and covert forces, why not the world of criticism? As a model of concision and effectiveness, Mr. Asare's brisk critical intervention is hard to beat.

Unfortunately, his good work was soon undone. Mr. Hirst reportedly found the episode "hysterically funny." And why not? The gallery owners—spurred, possibly, by the "six-figure-sum" that the work was expected to fetch—instantly set about putting his opus back together. Thank goodness they had "records of how it had looked." Imagine the loss to world culture otherwise! Actually, I suspect that the task of reconstruction was not all that arduous. This is not Humpty Dumpty we are talking about. The BBC report carried a photograph of the work. (The original? Or the reconstruction? Perhaps we will never know.) It looked exactly like what it was: a tray of "beer bottles, coffee cups and overflowing ashtrays." That description cannot be improved upon. Let us pause to recall the phrase "six-figure-sum": that means at least £100,000—$150,000, more or less. For a tray of "beer bottles, coffee cups and overflowing ashtrays." I for one do not blame Mr. Hirst for finding the whole thing "hysterically funny." Doubtless his banker did, too.

A "spokesperson" for the gallery suggested that Mr. Asare's salutary sense of order might have "a positive outcome, by encouraging 'debate about what is art and what isn't, which is always healthy.'" Here is my second suggestion: that an immediate moratorium be called on the "debate about what is art and what isn't." Far from being healthy, it is one of the great intellectual debilities of our day. It isn't a debate, it is a dead end. When critics catch the what-is-

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art-and-what-isn't bug, you know they are utterly bored by art. When artists catch that bug, you can see clearly why the critics are bored.

The great thing about the Damien Hirst/take-out-the-trash episode—apart from its entertainment value—is that it vividly demonstrates one of the major wrong turns art took in the twentieth century. Damien Hirst didn't originate that wrong turn. Far from it. He is merely one of the many casualties—or, depending on one's point of view, beneficiaries—of that detour.

Almost all of the artistic wrong turns with which we are now living had their origins in the early decades of the twentieth century. But what began as an elite indulgence with the appearance of Dada, Surrealism, and figures like Marcel Duchamp became a national pastime in the 1960s. It was then that the wrong turn became a superhighway, when (to alter the metaphor) a rare affliction became epidemic.

The most important culprit in this story is undoubtedly Andy Warhol. It was Warhol—aided and abetted by such figures as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns—who injected the streak of sinister levity that made Pop Art and its offshoots such a creepy, Janus-faced phenomenon: one face all smiles and Campbell Soup cans, the other a grim underworld of drug abuse, sexual predation, and nihilistic self-absorption. Pop Art enjoyed such enormous success largely because its practitioners managed to hold those opposing elements together in their art: sugar coating around a poison pill. For susceptible souls—and their number was legion—it was an addictive combination.

Artists like Damien Hirst and the other professional transgressors who populate the art world today are the heirs of Warhol's sinister levity. No serious contender for the Turner Prize can be without it. The Whitney Biennial exhibitions are full of it. And virtually all of the big-name star artists of the last few decades have been heavily endowed with that corrosive pathos. It is more a psychological than an artistic endowment, but the deliberate fusion or confusion of those faculties has been one of the distinguishing features of most trendy precincts of the contemporary art world.

Anyone interested in observing the crystallization of the sensibility that made artists like Damien Hirst possible should stop by the Whitney Museum of American Art and walk through the exhibition "Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977."[1] Few people, I think, will find it a pleasant experience. Film and video installations are almost by definition monuments of pretentious tedium. And even by the stringent standards of the field "Into the Light" excels in creating an atmosphere of irritating nullity.

The Whitney's press information describes "Into the Light" as "a major exhibition of works that had a transforming impact on art." That is partly right. The works from the 1960s and 1970s on view in the exhibition did have a transforming impact on art. But it was not an *aesthetic* impact. The Whitney speaks of that period as "'a golden age' that produced some of the most significant moving image installations ever made." In fact, it was a time of decadence and collapse, as will be immediately evident to anyone who revisits that slice of history. There are nineteen installations in the exhibition. None is of even minimal artistic interest. But taken as a case study, "Into the Light" is, well, an illuminating event. Its value is educational, not aesthetic. Like a trip to a madhouse or hospital ward, it helps us become better epidemiologists, furnishing examples—some brutal, some merely pathetic—of something gone dreadfully wrong.

It might seem odd to link artists like Damien Hirst to an exhibition devoted to

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1 "Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964–1977" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on October 18, 2001 and remains on view until January 6, 2002. A catalogue for the exhibition, edited by Chrissie Iles, has been published by the Whitney Museum of American Art (184 pages, $45).

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film and video. As far as I know, Hirst has never trespassed into those genres. But although "Into the Light" consists entirely of film and video works, its significance lies in the attitude toward art and culture it embodies. It is an attitude that Hirst and his peers have deeply imbibed.

The best way to understand that attitude is to ponder some of the catalogue descriptions of the works on view. Bruce Nauman's *Spinning Spheres* (1970), for example, is described as an attempt "to destabilize the viewer's perception of physical space." The summary comes in two parts: exposition, which is admirably accurate, and interpretation, which is preposterous.

> Four looped film projectors show a small steel ball, placed on a glass plate in a white box and blown up large scale, spinning fast for three minutes. Every time the ball comes to a halt, an image of the white cube can be faintly seen, reflected in the spinning sphere's surface. The enlarged, abstract surfaces obscure all sense of scale, creating a dizzying vortex that pushes the viewer outwards, back into the gallery space. *Spinning Spheres* demonstrates Nauman's interest in using repetition and ambiguity to create a new sculptural language, in which optical perception is explored through altering the parameters of physical space.

Is it necessary to point out that Nauman's work has nothing whatsoever to do with sculpture or "sculptural language"? That simply being repetitious is not the same as having "an interest in" (or insight into) the phenomenon of repetition? That filming a spinning ball does not count as "exploring" optical perception?

Exasperation is an emotion that gets a heavy workout in this exhibition. Here's what the catalogue has to say about Yoko Ono's *Sky TV* (1966):

> A camera is placed on the outside wall or roof of the gallery, trained on the sky. Live images of the sky are relayed to a television monitor in the gallery, projecting the exterior world into an interior space. . . . Significantly, the camera is aimed not at the viewer but at the sky, implying the necessity of considering an infinite world beyond the ego and the hypnotic pull of commercial television.

Again, one has to admire the clinical accuracy of the exposition—Ono's piece really is just a film of the sky—followed by the interpretive nonsense.

Most of the descriptions follow this pattern. They start deadpan and then wax fanciful. We know where we are when we read that William Anastasi's *Free Will* (1968) is

> a video sculpture that engages the space of the gallery, focusing on one of its most mundane, ignored features: the corner. A camera fixed on top of a monitor is trained on a corner, whose image is related live in black-and-white on a monitor screen.

A video of a corner. Great. I am sure you can imagine it. It supports the curator's talk about exploring "The conceptual implications of autism." But then what about this grammatically challenged flight: "This self-reflexivity evokes the Buddhist admonition of the individual's search for external answers, and the importance of looking into our own internal selves."

Complete rubbish, of course, and not even accurate about Buddhism. But you can still admire the effort to cloak aggressive banality with a scaffold of higher significance. That, in fact, is a procedure one must master to thrive in the world of art film and video. Consider Peter Campus's *aen* (1977). You walk into a darkened room. There is nothing to see until you turn around and come face-to-face with a television monitor on which is displayed an image of yourself upside down. Probably you've seen something similar a hundred times when walking by an electronics store with a camera trained on the passersby. But in that case you are merely being filmed. In the recesses of the Whitney you find that *aen* "belongs to a group of seminal closed-circuit video installations. . . . Campus's shadowy projec-

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tion operates on the one hand as a formal enquiry into space, surface, and scale, and on the other as a ghostly nocturnal reflection, which brings us into an existential confrontation with our own inner selves."

Most of the installations on view in "Into the Light" have the look of a grade-school science project. But instead of making sense of and illustrating some natural phenomenon, they glory in breakdown, futility, or simple inanity. In Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973),

> A film showing a large circle being drawn is projected onto the wall of a darkened room. A thin mist is introduced into the space, which makes the beam from the projector visible, as it gradually develops from a line into a large cone and the drawn circle is complete.

Which is about as gripping as watching grass grow. We are told that in *Shutter Interface* (1975) Paul Sharits "explored his rigorous analysis of the material properties of film and of the mechanics of cinema in spatial terms." What we actually see, however, are three colored rectangles pulsing and flickering on a wall while some unintelligible noise ("an abstract soundtrack") is piped in. Viewers are warned that the "strobing effect may be harmful for those with an epileptic condition." But what about people allergic to overbearing pseudo-artistic doodling dressed up in half-digested fragments of scientific jargon? Where is the health warning about that obvious danger?

Many of the installations have a political component. In Vito Acconci's *Other Voices for a Second Sight* (1974), for example, one hears the artist broadcasting "a pastiche of communiqués from twentieth-century left-wing revolutionaries, such as Che Guevara, Franz Fanon, and Abbie Hoffman, articulating the loss of direction and integrity that he and other artists felt had taken place during the Vietnam era." Of course, there *was* a loss of direction and integrity at that time, but it was a loss not detected but exemplified by artists like Vito Acconci.

While the political undercurrent is never far from the surface in exhibitions like "Into the Light," even more prominent is the pretense that the boundaries or conventions or languages of artistic practice are being "redefined," "interrogated," "transgressed," or "challenged." We have seen how Bruce Nauman's silly film was said "to create a new sculptural language." It is the same with every second work in this exhibition. Joan Jonas's *Mirage* (1976/2001) supposedly "redefine[s] the parameters of both sculpture and film." Simone Forti is credited with creating "iconic works that defined a new language of movement." Robert Morris "and others" are said to have created "a new language of art, in which our perception of the work became a central aspect of its meaning." Andy Warhol's double-screen films purportedly "dismantle . . . linear cinematic time." And so on. You would think, from the vast number of artists credited with redefining the conventions of their art, that it was the work of a moment to accomplish such transformation. In fact, redefining or creating a new language of art is something accomplished once in a century, if that.

"Into the Light" is hardly unique in broadcasting such pretentious nonsense. On the contrary, it is wholly typical of the contemporary art world. The idea that so much art succeeds in questioning its own conventions is partly a function of confusing word and deed. It is one thing to say "I am redefining the language of my art and creating a new sculptural vocabulary." It is something else to do that in fact. Nature abhors a vacuum. Confronted with work of striking nullity, human ingenuity populates the void with alibis of significance. It is a good rule of thumb in the contemporary art world that the level of pretension is inversely proportional to the level of artistic achievement. Accordingly, one *expects* the pretension level of "Into the Light" to be high. Nor is one disappointed. In the catalogue for the exhibition, Thomas Zummer ("a scholar, writer, curator, and artist") winds up an essay called "Projection and Dis/em-

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bodiment: Genealogies of the Virtual" with the observation that

> Again and again, the promissory structure of a Deleuzian "pure repetition," occluded by its own constant iterations, punctuates the spaces of media, modelling the play between the phenomenal and epiphenomenal that structures the work. The idea of deictic extension—of the body into space, over time, into other spaces, over generations—and deferral of the body has been a constant variable in media. In the resulting *méconaissance*, the body is seen arrested for a moment, everything is uncovered, *mise-en-scène* shifts into *mise-en-abîme* and we aren't even ourselves anymore.

No indeed.

Prose like Mr. Zummer's is an unmistakable warning sign that something has gone dreadfully wrong. Like a shooting pain down one's arm, it should prompt us to seek emergency relief. That is where stalwart fellows like Emmanuel Asare might be invaluable, if only there were enough of them. The works commemorated in "Into the Light" helped codify an attitude toward art and culture that finds its contemporary redaction in artists like Damien Hirst and all the many other partisans of sinister levity. Andy Warhol did as much as anyone to popularize that wrong turn. But the origin of the catastrophe lies earlier. In her essay for the exhibition catalogue, Chrissie Iles mentions Marcel Duchamp many more times than any other artist. This is entirely appropriate. For if Warhol is the father of sinister levity in the art world, Duchamp is the grandfather, the real paterfamilias. The spirit of Duchamp is such an abiding influence in the art world that we are tempted to forget that Duchamp did not attempt to revolutionize art, he attempted to destroy it. No one was more surprised by the absorption of Dada into the canon of art than Duchamp himself. "I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge," he noted contemptuously, "and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty." I used to think that Duchamp's many heirs had fundamentally misinterpreted him, that they were perpetuating, albeit in a grotesque and perverted form, precisely the kind of artistic activity that Duchamp had set out to explode. Artists like Damien Hirst and exhibitions like "Into the Light" make me wonder, though. There are many ways to destroy an institution. Duchamp opted for savage parody followed up with abandonment. (Why make art when one can play chess?) His heirs are less scrupulous. But perhaps they are no less effective. Inanity, leavened by unremitting pretentiousness, has certainly taken its toll.

When I finished picking my way through the dark corridors of "Into the Light," I decided to take the stairs rather than the elevator down from the fourth floor. On the landing of the third floor is a long bench, and on this bench—curled up and apparently fast asleep—was a young woman. She seemed so carefully poised that I stopped short: was it . . . could it be . . . a work of *art*? A performance piece, perhaps, illustrating the crushing effects of the capitalist-patriarchal juggernaut on female sexuality? Although sorely tempted, I refrained from rousing the sleeper to ask and continued downstairs. Imagine my surprise when I got to the landing of the second floor and discovered, curled up and fast asleep on the bench, the virtual twin of Sleeping Beauty on the third floor. This *must* be "an installation," I thought, and far more fetching than anything I had encountered on the fourth floor. It even occurred to me that it might be an ironical commentary on "Into the Light," underscoring the fact that it was an exhibition calculated to drive one into the arms of Morpheus. I hurried downstairs and asked a guard whether the sleepers were part of an exhibition. He gave me a blank look. Then I asked a passing administrator. She produced a worried look and went to consult the guard. Together they started upstairs to investigate. I made my way outside. I was sorry to have interrupted so much slumber. But at least, I reflected, the Whitney does not employ Emmanuel Asare: who knows what he might have tidied up?

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The realism of Thomas Eakins

by Michael J. Lewis

I would have them taught facts and things, rather than words and signs.
—Stephen Girard, 1831

My honors are misunderstanding, persecution & neglect, enhanced because unsought.
—Thomas Eakins, 1894

At first blush, the realism of Thomas Eakins seems an unpromising method for probing psychology. His method was an empiricism of almost clinical ruthlessness, grounded in anatomical study, dissection, and the photographic investigation of posture and movement. He did not banter charmingly with his sitters in order to coax lively expressions from them, as Sargent did, preferring to work in silence and look for those truths that cannot be pried out by conversation. It is difficult to imagine an artistic method more likely to drain a painting of all content beyond the purely physical and mechanical. And yet Eakins, surely America's most prosaic painter of facts and appearances, is also our most deeply psychological.

Eakins's work falls into two categories. On the one hand, there are his portraits, which feature the pensive and introspective poses that showed his solid, nearly sculptural modeling to best advantage. On the other hand, there are the genre paintings, which are more than mere scenes of everyday life: they depict particularly intense physical effort or mental concentration (or both). In a sense, these too are portraits, invariably built around strong character studies, and it might be more fitting to divide Eakins's work into portraits of thought and portraits of action. At any rate, the human form—solid, corporeal, elastic—is at the center of Eakins's art.

Eakins is a rather difficult artist to classify, and it does not settle the matter to call him a realist. (To quote Horatio: "There needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us this.") The problem is rather to specify Eakins's peculiar species of realism. It is not, for example, that of Manet or Daumier —that of horrific events, or social classes and institutions. Nor is it the realism of the Ashcan School, that of gritty urban life. Nor, certainly, is it the realism of contemporary American literature—of Theodore Dreiser, for instance—of the tawdry daily struggle. Although sometimes called scientific realism, due to Eakins's extensive use of the camera and the scalpel, it might more justifiably be labeled academic realism, because of its conviction that the rendering of the human body—that most academic of subjects—is the richest and most noble instrument of artistic expression.

Thomas Eakins was born in Philadelphia in 1844 to a "writing master," a calligrapher who lettered certificates and diplomas, and who taught penmanship. Except for his years of study, his entire career would unfold in the prim Quaker city. He attended the exclusive Central High School, where

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he took a rigorous program of mechanical drawing and showed an early gift for the convincing rendering of geometric solids in space. Upon graduation he enrolled at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, America's oldest art academy, where he studied from 1862 to 1866, having paid a bounty to avoid the Civil War draft.

The curriculum of the Academy was conventional: first drawing from antique casts and then promotion to the life drawing class, supplemented by lectures on anatomy. There was no formal faculty, and criticism was given by two history painters of the older Düsseldorf tradition—a tradition featuring punctilious draftsmanship and theatrical composition. Eakins evidently wanted more, for he took the unusual step of enrolling in an anatomy course for medical students at the nearby Jefferson Medical College, where he became fascinated by dissection. Having exhausted the opportunities for studying art in Philadelphia, he sailed for France in 1866 to study at the Ecole des Beaux Art.

In Paris he joined the atelier of the dashing Jean-Léon Gérôme, France's popular painter of Orientalist themes. Here he remained for three years, becoming one of the star pupils. For Gérôme's exotic subject matter—slave girls and snake charmers cavorting in harems, casbahs, and baths—he cared little, evidently more offended by the sentimentality than by the nudity. He appreciated his mentor's exquisite life drawing, and also his meticulous realism, invariably informed by photography, research, and a full array of costumes and props. After a brief stint with Léon Bonnat to practice portraiture, a hard-headed business decision, Eakins decided he "could paint heads good enough to make a living anywhere in America."

Prior to his return in 1870, he undertook a six-month study visit to Spain that acted, as it often did, as a tonic against French academic correctness and tightness of drawing. Nothing in his Philadelphia or Paris education quite prepared him for the dark Spanish palette and the Spanish predilection for broad, bold masses: "O what a satisfaction it gave me to see the good Spanish work so good so strong so reasonable so free from every affectation. It stands out like nature itself." The bracing effects of this encounter stamp his work until the end.

It is remarkable that Eakins was able to integrate these two sources, the consummate draftsmanship of Gérôme and the "broad effect" that was Velásquez's hallmark, so swiftly and so decisively. After painting his celebrated series of rowing pictures from 1870 to 1874, he at last created something with the sweeping dignity and drama of Spanish baroque art. This was *The Gross Clinic* (1875), a portrait of Dr. Samuel Gross performing a bone operation on a twelve-year-old boy.

The composition is rather overrun—four assisting doctors to the right, the boy's cringing mother to the left, and the cavernous space of the surgical amphitheater itself, crowded with medical students—but Eakins subordinated all to the patriarchal figure of Gross, scalpel in hand. The composition forms a pyramid whose apex is Gross's prominent brow, which emerges from darkness to be struck from above with a shaft of sunlight (from the operating theater's necessary skylight). This light on his splendid brow is juxtaposed with the poised hand holding the bloody scalpel, and indicates that Gross is a teacher who learns by doing—the blood on his hand ratifying the knowledge in his head. The painting is filled with magnificent passages: the brilliant and unexpected foreshortening of the patient, which dramatically compresses the urgent activity of the assisting surgeons; the radically narrow depth of field—an effect conceivable only after photography—that leaves Gross alone in crisp focus; Gross's magisterial calm, presiding over the ordered agitation like the captain at the helm of some great ship.

The Gross Clinic displays a strength and audacity unmatched in American art, and it must have come as a stunning rebuke to Eakins that the work was rejected as too unseemly for the Centennial. (It was hung

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instead in a surgical display.) The painting ought to have been followed by works of similar scope and ambition, but Eakins retreated to more modest genre and anecdotal subjects. A decade passed before he again found in his mature portraits something approaching the pictorial intensity of *The Gross Clinic*. But by this time, popular taste had moved beyond the dark interiors and bluntness of expression of what Lewis Mumford called the "Brown Decades." If Eakins had once counted on "painting heads" as a safe fallback position, he was sadly mistaken. Throughout his life he received tragically few paying commissions; most of the works we now consider his masterpieces were painted for his own satisfaction, and depict friends, colleagues, and family members.

The seasoned museumgoer can be pardoned if he greeted the prospect of a comprehensive Eakins exhibition in 2001 with a certain amount of dread. In these revisionist times, the temptation to forage for titillating scandal and disgraceful goings-on (usually of a sexual nature) often proves irresistible. And Eakins, who, as a believer in the artistic centrality of the human body, practiced what he preached, certainly offers ample fodder for gossip. He scandalized genteel Philadelphia by insisting on the use of nude models, including male models in all-female classes. He shocked his women sitters by cajoling and badgering them to pose in the nude (his strategy was apparently "gentleness combined with the persistence of a devil"). Surviving photographs show the artist posing in the nude with male friends and, in a few instances, with female models. More seriously, a niece to whom Eakins was quite close killed herself in 1897, for reasons that have never been adequately explained, although the family held him accountable.

The most celebrated episode of his career took place in 1886 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where Eakins had been teaching for a decade. After first announcing at an all-female class that he intended to show the complete length of a particular muscle group, he removed the loin cloth of a male model, violating the Academy's rules of decorum. Outraged students complained. Refusing to apologize or to promise that such an incident would not recur, he was discharged from his position. Although thirty-eight sympathetic students joined him in leaving the school and formed a local Art Students League under his direction, the incident made him something of a pariah in Philadelphia and ruled him out as a sought-after painter of fashionable society portraits.

A long catalogue of indiscretions and infidelities is more likely today to elevate the status of an artist than to discredit him. After all, in an age where the "personal is the political," disgraceful behavior can be made into a political manifesto, proclaiming a healthy freedom from bourgeois morality, convention, and hypocrisy. But such is not the case with the exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.[1] Here is Eakins's career in its entirety, comprising virtually all of his principal works, many little-known paintings, and a vast corpus of preliminary sketches and photographs. And the exhibition does that most old-fashioned—and most radical—of things: it places the focus squarely on Eakins's work itself, and not on his intimate life. A revelation of the chronological installation is that we can clearly see the one artistic stumble in Eakins's career, which took place in the early 1880s.

One usually assumes that the use of the photograph was part and parcel of Eakins's method—as it had been for Gérôme—and that his purchase of his own camera in

1 "Thomas Eakins" opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on October 4, 2001 and remains on view until January 6, 2002. The exhibition will also be seen at the Musée D'Orsay, Paris (February 5–May 12, 2002) and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, (June 18–September 15, 2002). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Darrel Sewell, has been published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press (446 pages, $65; $48 paper).

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about 1880 only simplified the process, placing his investigation of posture and movement on a much more rigorous footing. But it had immediate consequences for the types of paintings he composed, and their pictorial character. Eakins now tried a wide variety of subjects for whom nudity would be logical and expressive: a group of men gathered around a swimming hole; a scene of classical Arcadia complete with a youth playing a panpipe; a harrowing Crucifixion. Unlike his previous compositions, for which photographs supplemented drawing and oil studies, his subjects were now studied primarily through photographs. In the end, though, all proved curiously unsatisfying, as the exhibition demonstrates. *Swimming* (1884–85) is the finest of the series, a bold attempt to arrange and order a composition of heroic male nudes. Still, Eakins's skill does not free us from the sensation that we are looking at a painted photograph, especially in the case of the figure caught frozen in mid-air as he dives—an exclusively photographic touch.

The exhibition displays a great many of these photographs, often alongside the works they informed. Eakins clearly viewed them as means to an end, and many were printed rather carelessly. It is easy to see why Eakins, the consummate realist, fell for the allure of the photograph. But the camera, which can only deliver flat figures bounded by precise outlines, also contradicted his fundamental artistic identity, and his insistence on composing sculpturally, and in strong, broad masses—the "broad effect" he admired in Velásquez. Artistically, it was a dead end, and he abandoned this entire line of development in the mid-1880s. Ceasing his experimental work, he decided once more to "paint heads"—heads that form the vast bulk of his mature and late paintings. It is in this most conventional line of work, rather than in his self-consciously progressive or experimental, that his most satisfying and enduring work is found.

The first of these was his cherubic and spirited *Walt Whitman* (1887–88); Eakins sought out Whitman in 1887 following his disgrace at the Academy, poignantly seeking validation from a kindred spirit, a fellow freethinker who also clashed with pettiness and convention. Even finer is his exquisite portrait of Amelia C. van Buren, of about 1891. She sits in an oversized chair, wistfully staring into space as her head rests on the knuckles of her left hand and her right hand lightly clasps a folded fan. Here Eakins brilliantly contrasted the slight and rather touching slouch in her pose with the forceful geometry of the chair. But his real triumph is the head, which he carefully tilted and exposed to a raking light, emphasizing rather than concealing the strong planes of her forehead. It was precisely this interest in vividly describing the unique bone structure of his sitters that made him unpopular among so many of them, but that also gave them an unusually high degree of individual differentiation.

Nearly a dozen portraits in the exhibition are at this high pitch of quality, and depict a virtually inexhaustible catalogue of different specimens of thought. While the gently inclined head of *Maud Cook* (1895) suggests a kind of melancholy reverie, the superbly furrowed brow of *Henry Ossawa Tanner* (c. 1879), Eakins's talented pupil, suggests abstract thought itself. Only a few perfunctory performances, such as his very wooden rendition of Asbury W. Lee, which the client himself rejected, prove the old adage that only a mediocre artist is always at his best. (It is not clear why this was included in the show, since such superior works as his *General E. Burd Grubb* [c. 1898] or his *Dr. Jacob Mendez da Costa* [1893] were omitted, but such lapses are few.)

The exhibition's relentlessly chronological organization also helps us see how stalwartly Eakins resisted the prevailing tendency of his age to flatten form and exploit the decorative potential of the pictorial surface. Instead, he asserted the sculptural solidity of form, vigorously modeling in light and shade, and making the skull itself the central sculptural element of the com-

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position. In this respect he differed strikingly from the era's other great portraitist, John Singer Sargent, with his elegant coordination of pose, color, costume, and background. If Sargent's tendency, at bottom, was to reduce his figures to glamourous decorative patterning, Eakins's was to turn them into sculptural still lifes. Here the anatomical lessons of his youth reaped their dividends. Through dissection and experimentation, he learned that living bodies are never absolutely at rest, but maintain their repose through the reciprocal action of countervailing muscles. Few figures in repose are so vital.

The same sobriety and probity that marks the exhibition is evident in the handsome catalogue, whose seventeen essays are of uniformly high quality and jargon-free. Especially valuable are the essays of Marc Simpson, who looks at Eakins's career virtually year by year, following the model of his 1997 catalogue *Uncanny Spectacle: The Public Career of the Young John Singer Sargent*, and gives it the most rigorously chronological examination it has yet had. Like so many a modern catalogue, there is a vast sprawl of microscopic examinations of Eakins minutiae—his address in Paris, the textbooks he used in high school, the exact number of paintings he signed in perspective (it turns out to be seventeen). But in this fetish of factual information and discussion of context and technique, there is a curious diffidence about evaluating the work qualitatively—of answering that question about what the work actually means. Was Eakins merely a minor master of scientific realism, clinging in a provincial backwater to techniques that had been discarded everywhere else? Or was he a central figure of American painting? What is missing here is some sort of comprehensive assessment of Eakins's larger meaning in American culture as a whole, akin to the still unsurpassed account in Lloyd Goodrich's 1933 monograph on the painter.

And here the exhibition's worthy decision to avoid slumming through Eakins's private life proves to be rather too high-minded. A certain discussion of his psychology is essential to assessing his place, both in his time and in the history of American art. By training and long habit, he was a precise and meticulous realist. In this he bore the ineradicable stamp of his native Philadelphia and its relentless empiricism. This empiricism justified the use of the nude in his teaching, but it did not fully account for it. In Eakins's lifelong treatment of the nude, one notices something more than mere clinical observation and observation of muscular action; there is also an unmistakable undertone of carnality, a terrific reservoir of emotion kept under a mask of detachment and reserve. Were this note not there, Eakins's figures would be merely mechanically descriptive—and far less interesting to look at.

Perhaps part of the answer lies in Eakins's relationship to his native city, which had been an early center of American art and art education, but whose position had eroded over the course of the nineteenth century. Philadelphia had a long and proud tradition of empiricism, stretching back to its seventeenth-century Quaker origin. Quakers were not only distinguished by their insistence on plain speech and plain dress, but also by their particular traditions in education. Not requiring ministers, Quakers did not need universities in which to train them. Education in Philadelphia remained defiantly practical, and while the city became a leader in medicine, science, and the applied arts, abstract theory was never its strong suit. When Stephen Girard endowed Girard College, a school for orphans, in 1831—the single greatest act of private philanthropy in American history—he insisted that its students be taught modern rather than classical languages, and such useful trades as navigation and surveying. "I would have them taught facts and things, rather than words and signs," he proclaimed.

In 1881, Marianna Griswold van Rensselaer, one of America's finest art critics, paid a call on Eakins in connection with a

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profile she was writing of him. Eakins was still living in his family house and had not yet married Susan McDowell. Eakins fell well below van Rensselaer's expectations. She was appalled by his house and family ("decidedly of the lower middle class") and by his grooming ("not even a man of tolerably good appearance or breeding"), and was shocked at his ignorance of recent European art movements. Instead of a sophisticated cosmopolitan, like John Singer Sargent, she found him to be little more than "an inventor working [out] curious and interesting problems for himself." In other words, facts and things.

But much of the strength of Eakins resides in precisely this workmanlike and matter-of-fact attitude to his own art. And it also accounts for the peculiar receptivity to his ideas among his patrons at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Unlike its counterpart in New York, the National Academy of Design, the Academy was not established and run by practicing artists but directed by a board whose members were drawn from Philadelphia's industrial and mercantile elite. Typical of this class was Fairman Rogers, an innovative engineer and also the author of the definitive manual on coaching: horses and machinery, the two forms of higher culture in Philadelphia. Rogers supervised teaching at the Academy and was a stalwart defender of Eakins, appreciating his principled realism. He also gave the painter one of his few private commissions, *The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand* (1879–80) a technically daring painting of Rogers's coach, its horses' movements analyzed through motion study photography. So long as such a sympathetic figure oversaw instruction at the Academy (which he did into the early 1880s), Eakins's position was secure.

The realism of Eakins was comprehensible to patrons such as Rogers, who were steeped in Philadelphian empiricism, and uninterested in either fad or theory. It was Rogers who largely paid for the building of the Academy (1871–76), and who chose its architect, Frank Furness (to whom he was related by marriage). This was a brilliant Gothic essay; it was also an essay in architectural realism, as it boldly displayed its visible iron trusses, within and without, glorying in its bolts and rivets.

This is the distinctive tradition out of which Eakins's realism arose—not one particularly interested in social reform or muckraking, but one that accepted the consequences of the industrial revolution: the factory, the scientific device, the class structure, and, above all, the preoccupied modern mind. One of the responses to these jarring creations was to take refuge in the past. This became the preferred national solution—ranging from the faux chateaux of Newport to the elegant Gainsborough and Lawrence manner of late Sargent. But Eakins, and Philadelphia as well, was inoculated by longstanding Quaker indifference to display and fashion. The city was content to look on the ungainly Gothic machines of Furness and (albeit to a lesser extent) the plain portraits of Eakins.

This point might have been pursued with profit by the exhibition. But the Philadelphia Museum of Art, perhaps in keeping with this same local tradition of empiricism, has kept speculative interpretation to the essential minimum. And for this we should be grateful: the Eakins exhibition is a genuine triumph—a triumph that resoundingly confirms his status as the great painter of modern American life.

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Sculpture in the void: Giacometti at MOMA

by Karen Wilkin

These days, Alberto Giacometti is seen as the paradigm of his generation of Europeans—born in 1901, he died in 1966. He is regarded as the artist whose work best sums up the mood of the ravaged, postwar world and the tense decades of the nuclear age that followed. Recent horrors give his work new resonance. Beginning with Jean-Paul Sartre's catalogue essay of 1948, Giacometti's attenuated sculptures and scratchy paintings and drawings have been discussed in terms of existential angst, modern man's isolation from his fellows, and the impossibility of certainty in our troubled age. His agitated surfaces and nervous line have been seen as evidence of acute sensitivity, even spirituality, and anxiety. From a formal point of view, his work is discussed in terms of forms threatened by space, of an impossible aspiration to make physical objects that are all but subsumed by a void.

The legend of Giacometti reinforces these perceptions. His austere way of life, his repeated aesthetic and emotional "crises," and his oblique, self-deprecating comments seem to fulfill every prerequisite of the modern alienated artist's myth, from physical deprivation to an apparently unappeasable sense of failure—regardless of his obvious success in every sense of the word.

Even so, Giacometti always described himself as a realist who simply attempted to capture the constantly changing flow of what he saw. He was also, for much of his working life, an essentially conservative sculptor concerned not with daring reinventions of formal possibilities but with time-honored notions of modelling the figure through more or less conventional means. He seems to have felt no need to explore alternatives to sculpture's traditional material or structural palette. Apart from a few dazzling early pieces that are markedly different from just about anything he produced before or after, Giacometti remained faithful to a notion of sculpture as carved or modelled statue. At his best, he transcended the genre through the ferocity of his attack. In the strongest works, volumes seem crushed and proportions squeezed by the pressures of a restless hand and searching gaze; bronze seems to melt in the heat of feeling. (In his least successful pieces, the same stretched forms and pitted surfaces can read as the calculated hallmarks of a recognizable style rather than the inevitable consequences of expressive imperatives.)

Giacometti's position of eminence in the modernist pantheon is unassailable, yet the idea of Giacometti often seems more powerful than the realities of his art itself, perhaps because his mature sculptures are so familiar, so eminently recognizable, and so easily conceptualized—as, say, a conflict between space and mass. In recent years, there has been no shortage of occasions to see Giacometti's work in some depth and to evaluate its significance. Between 1994 and the beginning of 2001, simply because of where I happened to be, I was able to see a

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miniature retrospective at Acquavella Galleries in New York, a full-scale survey of the artist's entire oeuvre in Montreal, and a study of the relationship of his drawing to his sculpture in Paris. I'd have seen even more, had I been in Milan, Vienna, Munich, Portland, Oregon, or any number of other sites of major Giacometti shows in the past five years or so. Now another comprehensive retrospective, this time at the Museum of Modern Art, offers a chance to take stock of this acclaimed artist.[1] It's a lean and thoughtfully chosen exhibition—at least where the sculpture is concerned. (There are probably more drawings than necessary and an unconscionable number of flaccid paintings, but more about that later.) At MOMA, a judicious mix of expected and unexpected sculptures, nicely selected to emphasize the variations within even the most familiar series, suggests both Giacometti's strengths and his weaknesses. There are plenty of the iconic works from the 1950s and early 1960s, the years of the artist's greatest fame during his lifetime. What is more interesting, crucial works from the very beginning of his career are awarded the attention they merit. The section devoted to Giacometti's early years, in fact, is quite possibly the exhibition's highpoint.

In the currently reduced, pre-expansion space of MOMA, the show splits neatly into two parts, installed on two floors, connected by the elegant staircase that was once the heart of the original building. Part one is devoted to works made before Giacometti became "Giacometti," from his formative years through the Surrealist phase that absorbed him until 1934. Part two tracks his evolution from his post-Surrealist reengagement with perception through the development of his signature imagery to his last, powerful works. These divisions may have been dictated by necessity, but isolating Giacometti's early work underscores its coherence and originality. Beginning with the remarkably assured efforts of a precocious teenager still living at home in Stampa, we can see the ambitious son of a respected Swiss Postimpressionist painter transform himself from an accomplished, stylish, naturalistic sculptor into an adventurous modernist.

The young Giacometti's sharp-eyed self-portraits and affectionate portraits of his family are fascinating for what they reveal about both his raw talent and his first influences. That Cézanne was an early hero is visible in the tonal adjustments and broken planes of a firmly constructed image of the twenty-year-old artist at work; almost out of his chair, he stabs at his picture, nailing us—as surrogates for his reflected image—with his gaze while his angled limbs both restate the geometry of the canvas and seem about to propel him out of its confines. A period of study with the traditional sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle in Paris, beginning in 1922, is invoked by incisive drawings of figures and skulls, and an elegantly stylized, classicizing sculptured head. Giacometti returned at regular intervals to Stampa, but after 1922, Paris—and, after 1927, the famously comfortless, "barracks-like," studio building in Montparnasse—would be his home for the rest of his life.

In the ferment of the Parisian art world of the 1920s, the young sculptor soon discovered alternatives to Bourdelle's teaching. By 1925, Giacometti was confronting the formal challenges of tribal art and of Cubism, a shift in direction charted in the exhibition by a series of chunky, angular works. A group of portraits of his family from this period, the carved and modelled heads reduced to eloquent masses with incised drawing reminiscent of Modigliani, bears witness to an effort to fuse his newfound commitment to modernism with a desire to remain faithful, to a degree, to ap-

1 "Alberto Giacometti" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on October 11 and will remain on view until January 8, 2002. It was previously seen at the Kunsthaus, Zürich (May 18–September 2, 2001). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Christian Klemm, has been published by the Museum of Modern Art and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (296 pages, $65).

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pearances. (The curators suggest that, at least at the start of his career, Giacometti's periodic and sometimes extended returns to Stampa prompted more naturalistic works; strangely, the early portraits seem to anticipate the hyper-refined, modernized classicism practiced somewhat later by some of Italy's most acclaimed postwar sculptors—Manzu, for example.)

By the late 1920s, however, any wish for fidelity to appearances had been supplanted by a new need to explore the sculptural limits of flatness, thinness, linearity, and ambiguous associations. When Giacometti exhibited the results in 1929, his highly charged, allusive sculptures understandably won him entrée into the inner circles of the Parisian avant garde—the beginning of his Surrealist phase. As a group, the idiosyncratic works of the late 1920s and early 1930s raise the possibility that Giacometti might have become a very different kind of sculptor than he did, perhaps one more concerned with spatial articulation than with surface. The works of this period are among his most arresting, a series of strange but intensely evocative objects that translate physical sensation into form: *Man and Woman* (1929, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris), for example, with its potent metaphor of thrusting arc and clenched cylinder, separated by an eloquent gap that seems about to be bridged by an electric charge.

Other sculptures from these years are like artifacts from forgotten rituals, their meaning elusive, perhaps unknowable, certainly unstable. Frequently even their orientation seems provisional, subject to change. Most of them, in marked contrast to the anorexic sculptures for which Giacometti is best known, are robustly volumetric, dependent on confrontations of suggestively tapered, swollen forms. That the celebrated author of figures that melt into the air like ancient arrow points should often be at his best when modulating volumes is one of the surprises of the show. Still, it seems true not only of the early work, but also of a late series of sensitive portraits of his wife. The exception is the result of an early commission, the strangely inert, rarely seen stone *Figure in a Garden* (1930–32, private collection). At almost nine feet high, this uncomfortable marriage of Cubist geometry and Surrealist "veiled" figuration—think Lipchitz meets Dalí—is Giacometti's only monumental outdoor work and its size seems to have caused problems.

Other sculptures from the same period depend on more subtle questions of scale: the eerie horizontal slabs punctuated with small objects or furrowed with hollows and grooves are said to be intended as models for plazas. Whether or not Giacometti really envisioned their construction at architectural size, their very smallness is part of their power, giving them a double reading as both surrogate place and object. Scale constantly shifts so that at one moment, they read as boards for arcane games, while at another they become vast spaces that we mentally penetrate. It's difficult to imagine that the curving, extended *Project for a Passageway* (1930, Alberto Giacometti Siftung, Zürich), a Kiesler-like series of swelling, linked "chambers" that reads first as a reclining figure and only later as an idea for a series of enterable spaces, would gain anything by being realized at literal hallway scale; the echo of the body would disappear.

The sense of being magically transported into an unenterable place is a key element in one of Giacometti's unalloyed masterpieces, *The Palace at 4 A.M.* (1932, Museum of Modern Art, New York), a frail sketch of a building in which an obscure drama is enacted by delicately wrought characters. The symbolism may be fairly predictable, but the sculpture is still astonishing—part fragile house, part stage-set, part diagram of a remembered dream. Reproduced in *Cahiers d'art* in 1932, exhibited at and immediately acquired by MOMA a couple of years later, *The Palace at 4 A.M.* had an enormous impact on American art. It was one of the few truly inventive sculptures the youthful members of the New York School

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had a chance to study firsthand. David Smith, for example, was haunted by the piece, the way Manet was haunted by Goya's *Third of May*. Manet kept trying to paint an image of carnage that was as powerful as Goya's and never succeeded to his liking. Smith made several house-sculptures, as though trying to exorcise the power of Giacometti's insubstantial building, and succeeded in equalling (some would say bettering) his avatar. In these marvelously original constructions, which range from a rough-edged but reverent parody of *The Palace* to an unforgettable "self-portrait" as a schematic building, Smith both mined his own obsessions and turned the slender lines and the structural logic of *The Palace*, dictated, albeit casually, by the way a building is framed, into a new, muscular kind of improvisational drawing in steel.

Giacometti's other stunner from his Surrealist years, the brutally splayed, insect-like *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932, Museum of Modern Art, New York), was exhibited in New York and acquired by MOMA somewhat later than *The Palace* but was similarly influential. Its narrow limbs, moveable "hand," and spiky, brittle forms, like hollow masses peeled open, suggest a three-dimensional way of alluding to the figure, with edges and flattened planes rather than with solid masses. Its contradictory relation to the ground, at once casually spread and tensely straining away from the horizontal, suggest, as the *Palace* does, a provocative alternative to the traditional upright statue. (As displayed at MOMA, the tapering moveable "hand" of *Woman with Her Throat Cut*, usually placed in an extended position, was folded in to rest on the other clawlike "hand," a welcome change that enhanced the spatial complexity of the piece.)

The two-part installation at MOMA fostered a view of Giacometti's sculptures of the first half of the 1930s as being quite separate from his later work. This underscores the changes that resulted from his well-known rupture with the Surrealist camp in 1934, when he returned to working from the model and embraced the visible world, rather than the interior landscape, as his theme. There's no doubt that Giacometti's mature sculptures—the insistently vertical, whip-thin striding men, the hieratic women with their hands pressed to their sides, and the massive busts with the bladelike heads—are markedly different from the precariously poised, ambiguous masses and open cages of his earlier work. Nor is there any doubt that Giacometti the "realist" became as fascinated—or even more fascinated—by the space around and between things as he had been by things themselves. "Sculpture rests in the void," he told an interviewer in 1962. "One hollows out space so as to construct the object, and the object as such creates space, the space that exists between the subject and the sculptor."

Yet despite these obvious shifts in emphasis and intention, equally obvious constants remain. Questions about the instability of scale posed in *The Palace at 4 A.M.* are restated, slightly differently, by the minuscule figures on massive bases and the isolated, fragmented body parts of Giacometti's first post-Surrealist sculptures, by the exaggerated proportions of his later figures, with their tiny heads and immense feet, and by his busts with their narrow faces set above elephantine shoulders. Scale itself is also manifest in his groups of disparately sized standing figures and busts from the 1950s, anomalous gatherings that, at their best, vividly evoke the sensation of moving through crowds on city streets. (An unrealized project for Chase Manhattan Bank, begun about 1956, was to be a monumental version of this motif.) The metaphorical plazas and cages of the 1930s become the spaces traversed by walking men or the plinths and "carts" supporting standing women in the 1940s and 1950s. Surrealist dramas become distillations of ordinary urban experience. Later works reprise, too, the way *The Palace at 4 A.M.* and the cages turn voids into active, positive elements by circumscribing them, but once clearly delimited spaces escape their confines and

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begin to take precedence over increasingly fragile vestiges of mass. It's as though the sculpture had become a tenuous note of punctuation in the limitless space of the real world, a small insertion that holds amorphous masses of air apart.

The tiny figures on overscaled bases that preoccupied Giacometti during the war years mark a turning point. In these potent little sculptures, the surrounding space nearly overwhelms the object. "Sculpture rests in the void." This, of course, becomes the dominant characteristic of Giacometti's "signature" sculptures, of what the exhibition catalogue calls "The Mature Style." Style, alas, is the operative word. The pieces at MOMA reveal how perilous a course Giacometti steered between the cultivation of a personal language of form and the degeneration of that language into formula. In his most compelling works, he reduces the entire tradition of the upright figurative monolith to its essentials, testing just how much a figure can be (literally) pared down and still remain legible not only as a figure, but also as male or female. The most powerful of these are the standing women. Like rigid archaic deities, arms pressed to their sides, feet tightly aligned, they seem to wait: alert, watchful, and implacable, yet vulnerable. Their person-ness is as a much a function of their motionless verticality as it is of their tenuously indicated anatomy, the result of our habit of reading vertical objects as figures. The self-containment of Giacometti's confrontational standing women criticizes his more anecdotal gesticulating figures; by contrast, they can seem clever, the result of imposing a style or manner on a perceived action.

Spend enough time with Giacometti's mature sculptures, and the question of the difference between personal signature and manner keeps intruding. The restless, irregular surfaces of these pieces imply that their execution was a long process, perhaps a struggle, yet their cultivated roughness (apparently the result of much chasing and reworking after casting) suggests a rapid, automatic motion of the hand—the traditionally trained sculptor's method of building up masses with small, expediently pinched lumps of clay. The tension between these two readings is part of the expressiveness and meaning of the work, but the cumulative effect of so relentless an imposition of gesture implies the application of style for style's sake. The selection at MOMA subverts this by keeping us focused on the individual qualities of even obsessively revisited sculpture types. But the issue becomes newly urgent when we are confronted by the drawings and paintings.

Until about 1950, Giacometti's works in two dimensions, like his sculptures, were about exploration and discovery—unself-conscious records of efforts to assimilate the characteristics of other art, embody perceptions, and test possibilities. He struggled to pin down his observations with clusters of strokes that seem at once approximate boundaries and fixed coordinates that define positions or hold figures in place within the void. But before long, searching gave way to manner. The nervy, repeated gestures and unalterably centralized, frontal compositions—like the over-large bodies, the upward gaze, and smaller-than-life heads of Giacometti's sitters or the way they are always dwarfed by surrounding space—begin to look like a recipe. Instead of a sense of ferocious scrutiny and of a refusal to limit oneself to the single edge implicit in every touch made by Cézanne, we are offered a signature mark. Not surprisingly for a sculptor—even a master of extraordinarily reduced forms—Giacometti, in his later paintings and drawings, appears most engaged by the figure itself. (In the late 1930s, some of his strongest paintings and drawings were still lifes.) As he moves away from the figure into the setting, the more expedient his touch becomes; the framing borders that appear so frequently read as a means of reducing an unforgiving two-dimensional expanse. Style dominates, to the point where the next step would seem to be the jagged virtuosity of Bernard Buffet. At MOMA, the sheer number of dull,

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mannered paintings in an otherwise well-chosen show is inexplicable.

It can be argued that Giacometti, for all his accomplishment as a draughtsman, was indifferent to painterly issues. Tone, with its connotations of modelling, concerned him far more than color. Real confrontations of void and mass (however attenuated) interested him, not illusions of space or form, so his reliance on style to solve painterly problems is not surprising. Yet even Giacometti's sculptures court stylishness. The celebrated heads of his brother Diego, with their dramatically distorted relations of mass to profile, risk looking merely ingenious, partly because they are fundamentally old-fashioned modelled busts brought up to date by exaggerated proportions. The standing and walking figures, with their formalized postures, immense feet, pin heads, and corollas of hair, run the same risk. The MOMA installation wisely groups small numbers of related sculptures to encourage viewers to become aware of similarities without being overwhelmed by sameness, but the specter of formula still lurks.

But in Giacometti's last works these questions become irrelevant. In a series of busts of his wife, Annette, made in 1962, for example, and of his old friend the photographer Elie Lotar, made in 1965, force of feeling and intensity of gaze overpower considerations of style or manner. "The only important thing is to create a new object which conveys an impression as close as possible to that received when contemplating the subject," Giacometti said in 1962. In these tender, immediate portraits, he wrestled directly with perception, probing the structure of a familiar head, the characteristics of a well-known face, the set of a specific pair of shoulders, translating them into energetically worked masses. In the related drawings, accumulations of line seem to map the topography of particular features. A decade earlier, Giacometti stated that he had begun "to see the people in the street as if their living essence was very tiny. I saw living beings exclusively through their eyes." The head, site of the eyes and "the life that is housed in the skull," became "the main thing. . . . [T]he rest of the body is limited to functioning as antennae that make people's life possible." Hence, perhaps, the reductive elimination not only of individual characteristics, but also of corporeal presence so typical of his works of the 1950s. In the portraits of Annette and Lotar, Giacometti overtly celebrated the specific person—as he did in his portraits of his family—freely modelling heads that are responses to scrupulously observed physiognomies and supporting them with masses that suggest particular bodies: for Annette, a slender, feminine torso and for Lotar, a lean, vigorous trunk, dramatically contrasted with a skull-like, aged head. It's as though Giacometti had come close to the alienated strangers, seen from a distance, who populated his work of the previous decade and was enchanted by what he saw.

The exhibition is accompanied by a handsome catalogue that includes, in addition to illustrations of everything in the current show, revealing vintage images of the Surrealist works, including photographs by Man Ray. There are informative essays by two of the show's curators, Anne Umland and Tobia Bezzola, dealing, respectively, with the relation of Giacometti to Surrealism and with the changing concept of vision within his practice. In addition, there's a good chronology, a useful exhibition history, and a bibliography. The rest is choppily divided into subsections with rather breathless introductory texts by Christian Klemm. Like the exhibition itself, the catalogue is not entirely satisfying but shouldn't be missed.

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Developing in reverse: Signac at the Metropolitan

by Kermit S. Champa

In his happiest moments [Signac] succeeded in giving the modern picture—that makeshift with which we beautify our dwellings—a brilliant and even ideal form, making it a beautiful spot on the wall, that lends itself readily to a frame, and represents, if not all, yet the most valuable thing we need in a rational home—beautiful color in a beautiful form.
—Julius Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art*

Paul Signac's achievement is not insignificant. According to Meier-Graefe, the most sensitive and gifted critic of the art of the 1890s, Signac managed, in spite of his inconsistent production, to offer in his best work a taste of what had become aesthetically possible in painting. This was a result of the radical pictorial manipulations that had appeared with increasing regularity in French painting after 1860. With certain well-founded reservations, Meier-Graefe was willing to grant that, together with Georges Seurat, Signac had via the color-divisionist technique hit on a kind of creative bedrock. Meier-Graefe acknowledged the expression-inhibiting potential of the new technique—its enormous complexity made great demands on the artist—but Signac and a few others were able to deploy it effectively. Seurat, one of Meier-Graefe's most comprehensive enthusiasms, showed that there was virtually no limit to the monumental (even public) possibilities inherent in the divisionist system.

Writing around 1900, Meier-Graefe was not alone in his enthusiasm. The intelligent and eloquent French critic Félix Fénéon had championed the "Neo-Impressionism" of Seurat and Signac early in the 1880s. And he was not alone, either: many others concerned with modernism in French painting took their cue from him. The combination of science and anarchy that was seen to operate in "Neo-Impressionist" practice brilliantly complemented many of the intellectual enthusiasms of the day. And it did so while seeming to advance the nearly century-old attempt to graft the character of painting practice to formal musical practice. Not unexpectedly, Signac gave his paintings "opus" numbers well into the 1890s, and in a few instances even offered tempo indications.

The Neo-Impressionist project that Signac led by default after Seurat's death in 1891 oozed with modernity well into the twentieth century. Color divisionist practice was a first step for many—even most—of the artists who would constitute the international avant garde of the period just before World War I. The symbolist project had proved much less durable in the new century, largely because it had more or less distilled itself into the work of Paul Gauguin alone. Gauguin was the only painter of note to forge a pictorial style that had no link with Neo-Impressionism. In fact, his work can in some respects be understood as negatively constituted—as opposing, yet still determined by, Neo-Impressionism. Emer-

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gent artists of the 1890s—Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, et al.—vacillated between aggressive Neo-Impressionist modernity and Gauguinesque visual languor.

In Matisse, Mondrian, Kandinsky, the Futurists, and many others, breaking clear of this vacillation was critical for their artistic self-discovery. Surrendering often completely—if only briefly—to Neo-Impressionist practice seems to have cleared the air for all of them. The impersonality of the technique provided a reliable way out of visual inertia and forced the pursuit of a truly radical expression. That Neo-Impressionism served so many young artists so well is perhaps its greatest legacy. Signac was its principle figure through the first decade of the century just passed. And he was an important figure not only as a practitioner, but also as a manager of the first unofficial exhibition venue, the Salon of the Independents, which he helped to found in 1884 and which he led in various degrees into the late 1920s.

It is Signac's career as a whole—as painter and Neo-Impressionist entrepreneur—that merits him a long overdue retrospective. But the same could be said of several of his contemporaries, Maurice Denis and Emile Bernard in particular. Even so, let us be glad that Signac continues to receive his due in Paris and New York—perhaps more than his due, since a major retrospective such as the current one at The Metropolitan Museum of Art exposes both the frailty and the strength of his accomplishment as a painter.[1] Few artists of any period can survive a retrospective, and Signac survives less well than most—largely because the works at the Metropolitan highlight the indecision that increasingly invaded his work in the years after Seurat's death. This was far less apparent in the Guggenheim's Neo-Impressionist exhibition of thirty-five years ago, which was brilliantly engineered by Robert Herbert to include a sufficient range of minor works. For these minor works demonstrated the degree to which Signac at his most pictorially intelligent stood head and shoulders above his fellow Neo-Impressionists, save Seurat. At times, Signac seemed to comprehend even better than Seurat himself the nature and implications of the aesthetic project which they jointly directed between 1886 and 1891. At the Metropolitan, however, one must visit a second "satellite" exhibition (about a quarter mile away in the Lehman wing) to compare Signac with others of the Neo-Impressionist group. What are most provocative in this satellite—besides the Seurats—are a few of the color lithographs Signac produced in the early 1890s. These seem to have held their original color much more dependably than the unstable oil pigments Signac used. This was already apparent in 1905 to Meier-Graefe, and it can be confirmed at the Metropolitan by comparing the paintings and lithographs. The luminosity is far more evenly spread in the latter.

The Signac exhibition conveys an accurate view of the artist's career—one that began rather splendidly and ambitiously, but seems to have run out of energy or confidence (or both). One witnesses, in fact, the strange sensation of an artist developing in reverse. The late work, which is dominantly watercolor, appears grounded in the post-realist practices of J. B. Jongkind and the young Claude Monet. Both artists were favorites of Signac, figuring strongly in his polemical essays—essays that form the divisionist's retrospective handbook and white paper, *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism* (1898). This "treatise" outlines a trajectory for divisionist practice and discusses the work of the most prominent colorists of the century, including Turner and Ruskin. The latter's *Elements of Drawing* functioned as an important text for Signac because of its rejection of local coloration.

1 "Signac, 1863–1935" is on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from October 9–December 30, 2001. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Marina Ferretti-Bocquillon, Anne Distel, John Leighton, and Susan Alyson Stein, has been published by the museum in association with Yale University Press (340 pages, $65).

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Likewise, it probably attracted him for its development of a link between color harmony and musical harmony. This aspect of Ruskin's text made it even more modern than did the author's observations concerning color. Just as Ruskin's musical model came to direct the ideology of the aesthetic movement in England via Walter Pater and even Whistler, so too it reinforced the desire on the part of the growing circle of Wagnerists emerging in the French cultural intelligentsia to link painting to music. Artists as aesthetically distant as Signac and Redon both participated in the cult of Wagner. Signac, a lifelong yachtsman, even named his first boat "Manet Zola Wagner."

Signac's booklet came at a critical point in his career. His writing is a personal meditation on the roots of his own divisionist practice—a practice that was on the verge of drying up in his hands. In theory it works; in practice it backfired: after writing the booklet, Signac proceeded to work more spontaneously than systematically and with much reliance on direct momentary observation. There is a distinct "back to square one" quality in all this—but why? The retrospective does little to answer this question. The watercolors do not effect an aesthetic re-start; they simply document an artist operating in a holding pattern. Not surprisingly, Signac was able to look out from this position and recall the drawing style of Van Gogh, using that recollection to produce the most compelling of his late works: large black ink drawings on lightly darkened paper as vigorous and direct as the best drawings of Mondrian or Matisse.

Divisionist practice never vanished totally from Signac's work. Yet the carefully calculated mixtures and contrasts, the proportioning of the dot or dash unit to the scale of the picture—he could exercise none of this dependably any longer. One sees in Signac's late work that divisionism had to be either a total commitment or nothing. The late divisionist work gives one the odd impression that it is about Signac reminding himself who he is, but, more importantly, who he has been. It is genuflectional rather than genuine.

Perhaps the most generous way to comprehend the reverse character of Signac's chronological development is to view it not so much as a creative loss of nerve, but rather as a compensation for the deprivations of his earlier career. Almost before he had taken time to work his way through the realist and post-realist enthusiasms of the early 1880s, he met Seurat and converted instantly to his aesthetic logic, above all his attempt to create a system of painting that made use of scientific research into the operations of color. Unlike the Impressionist Pissarro, who was also to adopt to Seurat's methods, Signac had a very shaky foundation in prior practice. What he had managed were some intelligent essays in the manner of Monet, Manet, and some of the lesser Impressionists. But at base he was an amateur, a rapid assimilator, talented but with limited experience and almost no conventional academic training.

Signac wedded Seurat's method to his own out of intellectual conviction rather than aesthetic necessity. He had never really learned to draw, which, in very different ways, both Pissarro and Seurat certainly had. Signac accepted rather than knowledgeably embraced the severe restrictions placed on the activity of drawing in divisionist work. He certainly knew and respected Seurat's radical manner of drawing in black and white, but he could never emulate it.

There are just enough examples of Signac's preparatory drawings in the Metropolitan to indicate how oblivious he was to the ways in which Seurat determined the arabesques of shape that would enter the divisionist web. Through most if not all of his divisionist work, Signac drew with the intent of locating positions within his paintings, but waited until he had begun painting to attend to the task of translating positions and arabesques. In his justly famous *Portrait of Félix Fénéon, Opus 217* (1889), it is significant that he actually borrowed his arabesque background from a

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preexisting source, a Japanese decorative print. This print functions to sponsor the elaborate and carefully adjusted decorative ensemble that emerges in his best works, most of which he painted between 1886 and roughly 1892.

There is no good reason to criticize the ad hoc character of Signac's interest in usable decorative drawing, so long as the painted results are themselves fluent and resolved. But there was a trap waiting to be sprung—and it was sprung after Seurat's death. Signac became progressively less certain of how he might discover the template that would guide his divisionism. In his own drawing practice there was nothing to fall back on. For someone who hadn't drawn seriously, there was no possibility of comprehending the way Seurat's drawing worked.

Seurat, after 1882, engaged in a project of anti-drawing. He seems to have recognized that for drawing to be integrated into a regulated surface, edges that interrupt the surface abruptly would have to be sacrificed, and something like pure chiaroscuro which appeared more deposited on and into the paper surface than delimited graphically would have to be developed. In other words, drawing had to yield to pictorial embossing. This involved a radical re-conceptualizing of drawing—one that could only have been managed after the invention of photography. In a photograph, the image can be understood as having resulted from the operation of dark tones deposited on a light surface without any complementary delineation of those tones. Without emulating the photographic process, Seurat was liberated by it. It effected a mode of drawing that was as rigorous and predictable as standard academic practice, but that proceeded systematically from the surface alone.

The new anti-drawing of Seurat facilitated the discovery of arabesques of whole shapes. Once a given drawing determined this arabesque on a granular paper surface, it was a dependable candidate for transfer into a matrix of divisionist color. A template had been produced that—like the highly flexible yet coloristically malleable design for a Persian rug—was both perfect fit *and* perfect support. Signac thrived in the wake of Seurat's actual drawing and floundered increasingly when it was no longer routinely forthcoming. And he never found a reliable substitute for it in his own drawing practice, largely because that practice was preempted by Seurat's, almost before it had the opportunity to form.

The increasingly piecemeal quality of much of Signac's painting after 1894 gives testament to a kind of graphic helplessness. In the wake of this, Signac seemingly cultivated the late realist drawing mode—one based on observation rather than invention—that carried him through the end of his long career. In this mode he achieved a level of dependable competence that had earlier eluded him.

The modernist reversal that appeared in Signac's behavior is the first instance of such in the evolution of high-profile modernism. But it was hardly the last. It anticipated comparable behavior in the work of many twentieth-century artists; André Derain, Giorgio de Chirico, and Philip Guston come immediately to mind. In every instance the reversal is both radical and surprising: it calls into question the authenticity of earlier avant-garde behavior. But what one learns from seeing an extended body of Signac's efforts is that one is witnessing artistic honesty rather than an aesthetic sell-out. Realizing what he could not do, Signac attacked the root of his problem, his drawing, and in that attack discovered what he could do. He gave up on the "modern picture" when he recognized, probably rather painfully, that he could no longer manage it. And he found in a kind of graphic and watercolor production that had been passed over by the modernist project (which he had for a time been intimately involved in both directing and theorizing) an available technique that facilitated his artistic expression. Ultimately it is wrong to see Signac as an aesthetic reactionary: his

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abandoning of modernism was an act of respect, both to the project and to himself.

It is clear from this gathering of Signac's work that Monet was a crucial influence. The master he revered above all others, Monet seems never to have let him down and, fortunately, outlived him. Seurat's early death was somehow compensated by Monet's long and monumentally productive life. Perhaps one best understands Signac's reverse evolution by granting the support offered by the endless range of Monet's post-realist excursions—excursions that remained somehow modern even as they only vaguely reflected the permutations of twentieth-century modernism.

The present exhibition, in spite of the absence of a few key works, makes the best possible case for Signac's importance. It is lovingly and sensitively installed. In order to enjoy the exhibition, however, one must first ignore the absurdly conceived introductory room with its tacky photo blowups. In the exhibition proper, moreover, there is the vexing problem of frames. Many pictures are hung in deep, ornate frames that are totally inappropriate for paintings that are meant to address surfaces to the surrounding wall rather than to an illusionistic hole. There are just enough pictures hung in simple frames to show how the other frames frustrate the visual presence of Signac's work. With so much recent historical and theoretical interest directed toward the frame, there is something obstinately anachronistic about the Metropolitan's inattentiveness to this issue, especially as the museum has been a leader in the field of frame research.

The exhibition sports a nicely produced catalogue with better than usual color plates. Besides entries for each work, there are essays by six individuals closely connected with the exhibition or with Signac scholarship. The various parcels of Signac's career, from his drawing to his yachting, are treated in separate essays with results that are consistently interesting and informative—though rarely provocative. One is left with a hunger for compelling critical positions, but these rarely emerge from a routine exhibition catalogue. The catalogue will remain a useful scholarly tool, however, and serves an interested public reasonably well. Perhaps it is too much to demand more than this.

What does the exhibition contribute to the Metropolitan's always dazzling program of special exhibitions? It is, unlike many Metropolitan exhibitions, visually lively. And that liveliness is a liveliness of modernity—one always to be cherished in a locale in which the historically compendious is more often a concern. Suddenly the Metropolitan walls light up with strong—even abrasive—color. It is an experience to be cherished and, one hopes, repeated.

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Bruegel the Elder

by E. V. Thaw

The exhibition of Bruegel the Elder's drawings and the engraved prints derived from them at the Metropolitan Museum of Art offers a true feast for both connoisseurs and iconographers.[1] The exhibit is of special importance to connoisseurs, as it offers insight into the precarious methods of historical attribution. As advertised widely among the reviewers and academics who pay attention to such things, the exhibition claims to include fifty-four out of a total of the sixty-one sheets that are surely by Pieter Bruegel the Elder himself. We can be grateful that certain sheets that were formerly called Bruegel the Elder by most art historians of my era are included as object lessons in the radical revision of the artist's graphic oeuvre in recent years.

This "new" Bruegel is based almost entirely on the work of the late Hans Mielke, whose catalogue raisonné of the drawings was published in Belgium in 1996. He radically reduced the number of authentic Bruegel drawings, deeming spurious the great alpine landscapes that were formerly claimed to spring from the artist's well-documented trip to Rome. (Some of these panoramic scenes have been universally admired as opening a new chapter in the art of landscape: their precise observations merge with the concept of the sublime. One of these drawings, given to Bowdoin College early in the nineteenth century, has long been thought to be the earliest old master drawing of any merit to reach our shores.)

Reductionism is the easiest part of art historical attribution. One can rather quickly build a reputation for discrimination and probity by denying the master's hand in works that cannot be proven genuine except by documentation. It is much harder to argue the reasons for accepting a work, especially a somewhat untypical one, and to be so persuasive that one's opinion achieves general acceptance. Thus reductionism plays a large part in the study of many artists' oeuvres. The exhibition "Rembrandt After 300 Years," for instance, which took place at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1969, began a process of revision of Rembrandt's work that continues today. The noted expert Seymour Slive of Harvard supposedly remarked: "one more conference on Rembrandt and he will cease to exist as an artist!" The most famous recent example of somewhat blind reductionism was the Dutch Rembrandt committee's removal of the Frick Collection's *Polish Rider* from the Rembrandt corpus. A

1 "Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on September 25, 2001 and remains on view until December 2. The show was previously seen at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (May 24–August 5, 2001). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Nadine M. Orenstein, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum in association with the Yale University Press (323 pages, $60).

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change of personnel on the committee restored the mighty *Polish Rider* to authenticity —even though its provenance could not be traced before 1820 or so.

One of the drawings that seems most unlikely to match the accepted style of the elder Bruegel landscapes has recently been given to the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Although the excellent connoisseurs-cum-collectors George and Maida Abrams acquired the drawing as the work of another hand, Hans Mielke saw it on his deathbed, and the drawing has thus been included as one of the sixty-one anointed sheets.

The Morgan Library's great mountain landscape, one of the most admired drawings of my time, is perhaps the cause of Hans Mielke's whole rethinking. Mielke found a watermark in the paper on which the Morgan sheet is drawn that, it is claimed, is found only on paper dating from the mid-1580s and later. Bruegel died in 1569; he cannot, therefore, be the creator of this landscape. I would prefer to think that someone has misdated the earliest use of that watermarked paper rather than to believe that the Morgan drawing is by the "Master of the Mountain Landscapes" (as is the Bowdoin drawing also).

There is much more one could say about this kind of periodic revisionism in the scholarship of attributions. It seems to be a cyclical phenomenon: one day another drawing that *must* have been created before 1570 will turn up with a Strasbourg Lily watermark, and thus the whole set of mountain landscapes will be restored to Bruegel the Elder. In the meantime, some experts claim the "Master of the Mountain Landscapes" is either Jacob or Roelandt Savery, lesser artists of the next generation, who either were inspired by Bruegel or were outright faking him. Many of the disputed sheets, in fact, have very plausible signatures. This must cause a great deal of mayhem in museum print rooms. Of the drawings at the Courtauld Institute in London of the great Bruegel collector and connoisseur Count Seilern, only one out of seven is now accepted.

With all this in mind, let me confirm that the Bruegel the Elder exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is, nevertheless, a sheer delight. One sees so many rare drawings—drawings that are for the most part tours-de-force of the pen and ink medium. How could he have controlled the pen so completely? The best part of the exhibit is the extremely complex, Hieronymus Bosch-like compositions for prints on the subject of the Deadly Sins, the Seven Virtues, and great single compositions like the *Last Judgment* (1558), *Everyman* (1558), and *The Alchemist* (c. 1558). Without much pencil underdrawing, Bruegel controlled his rich brown and black ink to produce the most intricate large and tiny figures. His drawings contain foregrounds of massive detail and great distances of increasingly lighter ink tones. His shading and cross-hatching expertly and convincingly place every object, person, and monster in real space. In the case of the famous drawing *The Beekeepers* (c. 1567–68), the virtuoso technique is so refined as to have become a kind of pointilism.

Unfortunately, the prints made after these dazzling drawings are on the whole disappointing. The prints must have been a sensation in their day, however, and they spread Bruegel's reputation throughout Europe. Although the Met took care to round up brilliant early impressions of these engravings, they nevertheless look harsh and mechanical—especially next to the glowing and subtle emanations from the artist's own hand.

The facts of Bruegel's biography are almost nonexistent. We know neither when he was born nor where. By process of elimination, art historians have made some guesses and have looked to the few accounts published close to his lifetime by such compilers of artists' data as Vasari and van Mander. He is supposed to have studied with Pieter Coecke van Aelst, whose daughter he later married, but his work bears little relation to Coecke and thus testifies to Bruegel's originality. He entered the Antwerp Artists' Guild in 1551 and, before his

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death in Brussels in 1569, achieved considerable fame for both his paintings and his drawings for prints. His posthumous reputation in the Low Countries must have been considerable: the last years of the sixteenth century and the first quarter of the seventeenth century witnessed innumerable copies and versions of his compositions made by followers, including his sons, Pieter the Younger (who was only five years old when his father died) and Jan (who was not yet two).

It is extremely difficult to resurrect from the very troubled time and place of Bruegel's career what his works really meant to convey. The iconography is so complex and so inconsistent that it is not easy to offer precise analysis. Much of the imagery, of course, is comic and bawdy in the manner of Bosch, but underneath there is deadly seriousness. Bruegel seems to have had an extremely pessimistic view of human nature and a devout religious outlook that does not seem tilted towards either Catholicism or the newly minted Protestantism, whose conflicts were raging across the Netherlandish countries in those times. The great horrors instigated by the Duke of Alva and his forces only started in 1567, two years before the artist's death; still, Bruegel must have been aware of the inquisition in the Spanish-occupied territories in which he lived. The greatest patron among the private collectors who supported his work was Cardinal Granvelle, an envoy of the Spanish court. An early biographer claimed that Bruegel, as he lay dying, gave a number of his drawings to his wife to be destroyed so that she would not be found in possession of them. They might well have been politically or religiously subversive—which is what one would have expected Bruegel's private thoughts to have been.

In spite of my reservations about the "new" Bruegel that these somewhat cocky art historians have put in the place of the earlier construct offered by the likes of de Tolnay, Münz, Stechow, and Dvořák, this show is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I do have a few reservations about the catalogue accompanying the exhibit, however. As is customary for the Met these days, it is a handsome book. All of the drawings—including those now not deemed original Bruegels—are very well reproduced in the sepia tones close to the ink of the originals. Yet the text, although full of the requisite information, is written for a popular audience and occasionally descends to the level of the simple-minded. The entries and introductions, principally by Nadine Orenstein of the Met's department of prints and Martin Royalton-Kisch, a drawings curator for the British Museum, do not offer definitive scholarly discussions and arguments. Still, I am grateful to the Met that its borrowing power achieved such a monographic exhibition of an artist whose work is so rare. How about a Bruegel painting exhibition soon? Like a Vermeer show, it will be easy; there are only forty of them.

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The various Alex Katz

by Mario Naves

The painter Alex Katz is a curious figure in the annals of postwar American art. Throughout his fifty-year career, he's been perpetually situated to the side of the art world's mainstream, yet never so far to the side that he isn't in the thick of things. A realist who came of age during an era predominated by abstraction—Abstract Expressionism to be exact—Katz has been linked with a number of artistic tendencies, such as Color Field painting, Pop Art, and realism—both "new" and the traditional. He's found a congenial home in all of them. Yet the closest one can come to placing Katz is to note that he's a key figure in the generation of painters—it includes Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers, Nell Blaine, and Leland Bell—that pursued figurative art in the shadow of the New York School.

Even among this group of square pegs, however, Katz sticks out, a fact noted by the critic Sanford Schwartz in 1973. He described Katz's art as standing "a little elusively by itself" with "allegiances all over the field." The allegiances Schwartz referred to were stylistic, but the multiplicity of critical allegiances that have formed around Katz's work is equally "all over the field." Any artist whose career traverses half a century is bound to have a diversity of devotees, but Katz fans are so wide-ranging in outlook that one can't help but do a double take. Joining Schwartz in writing appreciatively of Katz's paintings is Fairfield Porter, who possessed as shrewd an eye as any. Yet the artist can also count among his admirers the indefatigably verbose art critic Donald Kuspit, the controversial historian Simon Schama, the bestselling novelist Ann Beattie, and the contemporary scene's silky arbiter of cool, Dave Hickey, who once favorably compared Katz's work to—but of course!—a Hercules movie starring Steve Reeves.

What's more than a little troubling about Katz's fans is how their heterogeneity so readily makes room for those with extra-aesthetic axes to grind. Svetlana Alpers, Professor Emerita of the History of Art at the University of California, Berkeley, for instance, counts herself as a Katz devotee—or so one is likely to conclude from the essay she wrote on the occasion of a recent exhibition of his pictures. Yet the only time Alpers writes without her characteristic lukewarmness is when she talks around Katz's art, particularly when expressing her impatience with those who treasure "art as something distinctive, something which might have its own history." For Alpers art is nothing of the sort, rather, it is just "one cultural artifact among many others made at a particular time."

Similarly, Eric de Chassey, in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition "Alex Katz: Small Paintings," begins his essay by informing us that "Alex Katz is one of very few artists working today capable of creating works that can be reconciled with the world, without seeming anachronistic." Forgetting for a moment the questions one

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wants to ask about such a loaded sentence, one intuits that Chassey, like Alpers and Hickey, doesn't much care for—how to say it?—high art. But they do care for Katz's art quite a lot. One wonders what a self-described traditionalist like Katz makes of such enthusiasts. One also wonders if the "elusiveness" Schwartz writes of is a loyalist's way of implying that what makes Katz's art special is not so much what it is, but rather what it can absorb.

This past fall, Manhattan's various art districts offered five separate exhibitions devoted to aspects of Katz's work. If their cumulative effect isn't an indication of "Katzmania" (for the poker-faced Katz is unlikely to induce mania), it does point to his prominence in the art world. The Whitney is presenting the aforementioned "Alex Katz: Small Paintings."[1] It is a two-part exhibition, featuring pictures painted between 1950–1980 at the Whitney's Philip Morris branch and works created within the last twenty years in the lobby of the uptown museum. Katz's very latest large-figure paintings and landscapes were on display at PaceWildenstein's new branch in Chelsea,[2] and the Peter Blum Gallery in Soho mounted a complete survey of Katz's woodcuts and linocuts.[3] In addition, an impromptu sampling of the artist's work could be seen during October on West 26th Street in the anteroom of the Robert Miller Gallery. Taken together, these shows in no way made up a comprehensive overview of Katz's contribution to art (nor were they intended to be so). They did, however, provide an opportunity to get a handle on a body of work whose chief characteristic would seem to be its handlelessness.

Katz earned a significant place in the art history books for his larger-than-life figures in billboard-sized paintings. Whether they depict smartly trimmed cosmopolitans, snow-covered forests, or the family dog, his pictures are what we now think of as "Katzian": laconic and even-keeled, bland yet unsparing, brusque yet savvy. The works' expansive scale, disassociated space, awkward stylizations, and uninflected areas of color make Katz not so much a realist as a painter whose take on observed reality is so remote that one could almost consider him an abstract artist. Katz isn't the first to blur the distinctions between realism and abstraction, but he is the most recognizable—indeed, the most popular—of its practitioners. A large part of his popularity can be attributed to the subjects: family and friends, light conversation, sunny backyards, and a leisure that's nothing if not ample. The paintings aren't an argument for the good life, per se, but evidence of one person's good fortune.

Viewing the large paintings at PaceWildenstein, one easily saw why Katz garners admiration. His recent panoramas of picnics, parties, stylish youths, and landscapes are immaculately composed, resolutely thought through. Their juxtapositions of scale, image, and space strike the viewer with a severe, in-your-face immediacy. They are as tight as a drum. Before too long, however, the viewer finds himself experiencing an is-that-all-there-is deflation. Katz's paintings are, in fact, all immediacy. Many painters of my acquaintance have professed respect for Katz's drive, while lamenting his refusal—or inability—to follow through on a picture. His is an oeuvre that offers the same tinny, sheeny jolt over and over again. That it's a jolt with a certain wit and élan is undeniable. But it's a very lean jolt.

1 "Alex Katz: Small Paintings" is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in two parts: at the main branch (September 21–December 2, 2001) and at the Philip Morris branch (October 5, 2001–January 4, 2002). A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Adam D. Weinberg, Dana Self & Shamim M. Momin, has been published by the University of Washington Press (120 pages, $30).

2 "Alex Katz: Large Paintings" was on view at PaceWildenstein Chelsea, New York, from October 17 to November 10, 2001.

3 "Alex Katz: The Complete Woodcuts and Linocuts" was on view at the Peter Blum Gallery, New York, from October 4 to November 24, 2001.

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Katz's art is cool and quick. He famously remarked that his goal was a style "emptied of meaning, emptied of content." This suggests that Katz is pursuing something purely formal, purely concerned with the pictorial means of making a picture. But the problem with the work isn't that it's pure or that it's formal, it's that it's disconnected. For Katz, the act of putting brush to canvas is less a passion than a mission—one that should be done very quickly. In an interview a few years back, he admitted as much: he declared that his interest lay in "dealing with the idea of being a . . . master craftsman." He even challenged anyone to compete with him "on a craft level—painting a twenty-foot painting, wet on wet for six hours." This statement is revealing, not just for its casual arrogance, but for its assumption that perspiration is the better part of inspiration, that efficiency is preferable to engagement.

As an addendum to *Ada's Garden* (2000), the huge 10 x 20 foot canvas that was the lynchpin of the PaceWildenstein show, the gallery included a series of ten 12 x 16 inch preparatory studies. Each of the small pictures features a single figure—recognizable from *Ada's Garden*—set against a brushy ground of black. The inclusion of the studies offered not only a helpful lesson in how an artist plans a painting, but also in how some artists are better off when letting down their hair. While the small pictures are as abbreviated and as quick as we expect from a Katz painting, they're also a bit more than what we expect a Katz painting to be. An economy of means, in the studies, isn't a matter of filling in between the lines, but a gambit to be met with and relished. Likewise, their speed is a matter of spontaneity and freedom, not of making a deadline. We feel the bracing mastery of a painter working off the cuff and we take pleasure in the paintings' sensuality—not only in terms of their brushwork, but also in regard to the appreciation they demonstrate for the human form. Drawing has never been Katz's strength—his lack of fundamental drawing skills is his most glaring liability—and his signature studies are populated by the stiffest mannequins. In the paintings, however, we get a nuanced sense of the body—of bones and muscle, of the slightest gestures—and of what those gestures may connote. Here Katz's pictures are enlivened by the terse sociability that the bigger canvases promise but rarely—if ever—deliver.

If the studies aren't quite revelatory—even at his juiciest Katz is always himself—the satisfactions they offer are real enough. This is what makes the "Alex Katz: Small Paintings" such an engaging, if mild, pleasure. From the flinty colors and jabbing brush strokes of *Trees* (1951–52), to the curt dabs and slurs of *Yellow Road* (1998), the small paintings—again, often studies for larger pieces—are the work of a man of stoic temperament who is nonetheless intensely taken with the world. (They certainly are the work of a man intensely taken with his wife, Ada, whose stern and elegant beauty gives an otherwise undemonstrative art its one recurring nugget of soul.) The small pictures are sparked by unheralded and utterly mundane events: the comedic peak of an infant's hat, sunlight dappled on an oncoming tide, a cat asleep on a chair, an unruly shock of hair. It's in these pieces—unkempt, offhand, and inching towards intimacy—that one realizes how much Katz, the grand reconciliator of realism and abstraction, has been oversold—how the big paintings are all things to all people because their emptiness repels nothing. The small paintings, in contrast, forego brand-name stylings for a plain-spoken solace taken in transitory moments that are nothing if not homey. Katz's true role, the one that should be acknowledged in the history books, is that of the most sophisticated of Sunday painters.

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Poems
by William Virgil Davis & Wilmer Mills

Poem ending with a variation on a line by Charles Wright

Winter, and sleeves of grey bone hang limp in
the wind. The tortured sun has cut its own throat.
This late in this late century nothing is new

or news. We nod off in the early afternoons
and wake, unrested, to icy feet and fevers.
Under their snowy hill, out of the wind at last,

my parents continue to repeat their prayers
in the same ways that we, with our raspy throats,
try to comfort one another. How many days

have disappeared into dark tunnels? How many
times will we come back to empty cupboards
and drained drinks, to landscape like laundry

frozen on a line? In a bare corner of an empty
room an old spider has spun an awkward web.
The distance between the living and the dead

is no more than one heartbeat or one breath.

—William Virgil Davis

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Courtyard looking toward Artemis from the west cloister

—Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

Unarmed Artemis, your mouth
opened in awe or slight surprise,
you stand surveying the scene in

this most modern garden. Centuries
spin before your sightless eyes while lilies
ring their silent bells. Frail ferns

and cineraria whisper softly
in the stone-stilled atmosphere.
We wander among the squared-off

rooms surrounding you, turning
over in our minds thoughts we thought
we had forgotten. Each turn brings

back to breath the beautiful,
the true. Then we return to you.
Demetrius of Ephesus, your fears

have proven false. We stand and stare,
and wonder if, in our modern world,
when we return to it, our being here

and seeing you will make much
difference. We walk out into the world
to do what we must do.

—William Virgil Davis

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Remembering Grand Isle

They brought me here before my memory.
And yet each time I see where once I came,
My recollection is peremptory.
Past perfect and the present are the same.

I see and I have seen the myrtles lean
With live oaks in the vector of the rains.
They're written here, both stiff and evergreen,
Engraved invisibly by hurricanes.

One cannot see the stylus of the storm
Except for how it chisels limb and leaf.
The infant's eyes record no shape or form,
And yet our hearts are carved like bas-relief.

When place and buried memories combine
With my todays and yesterdays of line
The folds and wrinkles of the past appear.
The mind itself becomes a souvenir.

—*Wilmer Mills*

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Theater

Plum on Broadway

by Mark Steyn

On the face of it, P. G. Wodehouse and Andrew Lloyd Webber, currently sharing billing on *By Jeeves* at the Helen Hayes, would appear to have little in common. Wodehouse is widely credited for helping invent the American musical, Lloyd Webber for having destroyed it. The first claim happens to be true, as attested by Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, Alan Jay Lerner, and other admirers of Wodehouse's Broadway work eight decades ago. The latter claim is a bit of wishful thinking: The Great White Way wound up like Mark Green's mayoral run—it had years of experience and all the qualifications, but, through its own sour, joyless complacency, defeated itself and let the other fellow inherit by default.

It's easier to see that now that *Cats* and *Starlight Express* have departed. Lloyd Webber hasn't had a hit since *Phantom* fifteen years ago—though, the media's herd mentality being what it is, everyone was still writing about him being "invincible" and "unstoppable" until the mid-Nineties. *Aspects of Love* and *Sunset Boulevard* both lost money, and his two most recent works, *Whistle Down the Wind* (1996) and *The Beautiful Game* (2000), never even came to Broadway. The West End musical seems to have returned to its pre-Lloyd Webber condition: something for strictly local consumption. *The Beautiful Game*, a show about IRA violence in Northern Ireland (really), closed a few weeks ago in London, having failed to recoup. According to Lloyd Webber, the audience no longer exists for demanding, intelligent theater concerning serious subjects. To which the uncharitable might respond: yeah, well, whose fault is that?

So here he is with *By Jeeves*, booked into Broadway's smallest house and chugging round press interviews playing da liddle guy trying to get a break in a town dominated by blockbusters like *The Producers*. At the St. James, the producers of *The Producers* are selling last-minute tickets for $480. At the Helen Hayes, Lloyd Webber is enticing customers with complimentary English "tea and biscuits" (i.e., cookies). Unlike *Cats* and co., *By Jeeves* is small-scale—a six-piece band and a $1.8 million budget—but it actually predates the juggernauts. It began life twenty-six years ago as just plain *Jeeves*, when Lloyd Webber, Tim Rice, and Alan Ayckbourn decided that the Bertie Wooster stories were just crying out for adaptation. They weren't the first to be infected with this madness. For as Wodehouse noted of Jeeves in 1931, "I have had lucrative offers for his service from theatrical managers, motion picture magnates, the proprietors of one or two widely advertised commodities. . . . But, tempting though the terms were, it only needed Jeeves's deprecating cough and his murmured, 'I would scarcely advocate it, sir', to put the jack under my better nature. Jeeves knows his place, and it is between the covers of a book."

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Thirty-five years later, when the paragon of artistic integrity received a call from the BBC, he "just asked them how much gold they had in mind. . . . Today, I should not object very strongly if someone wanted to do *Jeeves on Ice*." So, when what he called "the JC boys"—Rice and Lloyd Webber had just had their first Broadway success with *Jesus Christ Superstar*—put their proposition to him, Wodehouse was more than happy to let them get their metaphorical skates on and fall flat on their butts. The master was then in his nineties, and his communications with the boys during the fraught writing process were not exactly encouraging. "I feel a singing Jeeves to be all wrong," he pronounced in a letter also recommending Rice and Lloyd Webber get their hair cut.

Tim Rice took his advice, not on the hair but the show. He quit on the reasonable grounds that "I felt I was making Wodehouse less funny." Playwright Alan Ayckbourn assumed the additional duties of lyricist. Eric Thompson (father of Emma) was signed to direct but was sacked at the last minute. On Valentine's Day 1975, with opening night little more than a month away, Sir Pelham Grenville Wodehouse died, and a few weeks later so did the show.

Wodehouse spent much of his life around the theater and, when pressed upon the construction of his novels, would invariably mumble something about them being like "a musical comedy without music." If he'd thought there was a real musical comedy struggling to get out of Bertie's japes, he'd presumably have done it himself. The traditional objection to their suitability is what we might call the Healing Zephyr Effect. In their very first outing, when Jeeves arrives from the agency to enter his employ, Bertie tells us "he floated noiselessly through the doorway like a healing zephyr." All but one of their adventures are told from a Bert's eye view: Wooster may be a nincompoop, but he comes from a time when a nincompoop could be relied on to have a fairly wide frame of reference from the Bible, Shakespeare, and schoolroom poetry, even if he was sometimes unsure what came from where. In contrast to our own generation of wealthy nincompoops—Richard Gere, say, or Oliver Stone—Bertie has an impressive flair for imagery, le mot juste, and so forth: "I squared the shoulders and strode to the door, like Childe Roland about to fight the paynim." The result of all this is that what's happening is less interesting than the description of what's happening: a daunting prospect for an adaptor.

But, when you think about it, you could say the same thing about musicals. Most of the plot moments in a musical play are not, in and of themselves, especially gripping: what makes the difference is the spin the song puts on them. In *My Fair Lady*, for example, Freddy Eynsford-Hill strolling down the street where Eliza lives is neither here nor there. But Freddy singing "On the Street Where You Live" transforms the moment in a way exactly analogous to Wodehouse: the humdrum human maneuver is less significant than its characterization. Presumably that's what the novelist enjoyed about writing songs with Jerome Kern: in a musical, the lyrics are the equivalent of the narration—that's where you'll find the imagery, the color, the details. Here's a Woosterish sentiment from a 1924 Wodehouse show called *Sitting Pretty*, in which a young chap bemoans the likelihood of his ever finding someone to waltz down the aisle: "For all the punch that march of Mendelssohn's has/ He might as well have written nothing but jazz."

Since Wodehouse had two outlets for his love of language, you can see why a wily adaptor would believe he could transfer at least some of the Wodehousian character of the novels to the stage. After all, an artificial form such as the musical presents fewer problems than the naturalistic television adaptations seen on PBS a few years back. In the mid-Nineties, Alan Ayckbourn dug out the script, threw it away along with all but three of the songs, and started from scratch. The frame of the new version is that Bertie has been booked into a church hall in Little Wittan to give a concert in aid of the steeple repair fund. Alas, his "Evening with Ber-

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tram Wooster" is suddenly plunged into jeopardy when his banjo is stolen. While waiting for a substitute to arrive, Bertie holds the fort by recounting the goings-on at Totleigh Towers, home of his problematic sweetheart Madeleine and her father Sir Watkyn. Bertie is played by John Scherer, who spends his time if not exactly permanently nonplused then certainly far from plused. As Jeeves, Martin Jarvis—the only Englishman in the cast—is pitch perfect from the moment we first see him, head tilted and thumbs behind his trouser seams. Jeeves, it should be said, is not a butler, but a gentleman's gentleman, a valet (hard "t" —none of your valet parking at Totleigh Towers). As it happens, Tim Rice's great-grandfather was valet to Lord Tennyson, Rice's fellow rhymester (as *Variety* would say). I've no idea how they in particular got on, but there is an expression, "No man is a hero to his valet," that accurately captures the intimacy of the master/valet relationship in general.

The play-within-the-play device—or, rather, the one-man-show-within-the-play—allows Bertie to serve as narrator and gives the evening a kind of cheerily village-England take on other concept musicals. At Sam Mendes's *Cabaret*, the conceit was that we were patrons of Berlin's decadent Kit-Kat Klub. *By Jeeves* offers an even more exotic frisson: we are the villagers of Little Wittan; the tea and biscuits are served from a Women's Institute table, the signs over the doors to the orchestra read "Community Hall" (though "community" strikes me as a tad anachronistic). Roger Glossop (no relation to Wodehouse's Sir Reginald, but the real name of the designer) has created an anonymous brown set quite as drab as any real English village hall, and, of course, as this is not a professionally staged production but only a hasty improvisation by Bertie, there are no proper props, only a lot of make-do from chums in the audience like Bingo and Stiffy (Stiffy is a gal: there are no male Stiffys in Wodehouse). A yellow ball stands in for the moon, a big cardboard box the motorcar, with the sense of motion provided by a pal holding a tree and running. Whether or not this is a good Wodehousian jest, it's certainly a droll Lloyd Webberish one, though if you're expecting crashing chandeliers and space-age rollerskaters you may feel a little cheated paying Broadway prices for a church-hall entertainment.

Since the show first re-emerged from the grave at the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut five years ago, I've caught it at a couple of stages in its unending evolution. Whenever I've discussed it with anyone, the complaints have always been about whether or not it did justice to Wodehouse. But, in New York, alarmingly, many critics seemed eager to proclaim Wodehouse *lui-même* a dud. The right not to find a joke funny is one of the most precious of human freedoms, and if we give that up then the terrorists will have won. But, even so, the reviews struck me as not a little churlish in their dismissal—"lame amusement," "acquired taste," "doesn't travel"—and, what with all the stuff about "blathering Brits" and "too English," bordering on the racist. "This will not likely entertain anyone baffled by the alleged hilarity of such names as Stinker Pinker, Gussie Fink-Nottle, Bingo Little, and Stiffy Byng," complained Linda Winer of *Newsday*.

As it happens, they're not meant to be hilarious. "Lay off the funny names" was Wodehouse's advice in the manner of appellations. Rather, what Stiffy and Stinker are is typical—of a world where nicknames are all but compulsory. Wodehouse himself was "Plum" to his friends; I was acquainted with Lady Dorothy Lygon for many years and, like everyone else, called her "Coot," though I never knew why. Such names as Gussie and Bingo are not gags so much as sharp social observation. It's a bit like complaining that these wacky Wahabbis keep expecting to get a rise out of us just by calling themselves "Ibn" and sticking "bin" in the middle of their handles.

Besides, for all the talk about his excessive Englishness, one could make the case that

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Wodehouse is not a British writer at all. He lived in America on and off from before the First War and permanently from the Second; he never visited Britain after 1939, and official recognition did not come until 1975 when, six weeks before he died, Her Majesty, cutting it exceeding fine, knighted him: by then, he had been a U.S. citizen for thirty years.

Ah, you say, but, whatever his passport, he continued, in his work, to suck up to what John Lahr in *The New Yorker* calls "the stick figures of privilege." Bored by Wodehouse's "artificial merry-go-round" and the other folderol of the current season, Lahr argues for better gags: "When jokes are good, they illuminate, challenge received opinion, and make unacceptable ideas irresistible. (Here's one from Orton: 'All classes are criminal today. We live in an age of equality.')"

Each to his own, but I'd say the example undermines the thesis. Far from "challenging" anyone, Joe Orton's crack is a prize example of the joke that panders—a remark that advertises its own cleverness and therefore invites the audience, by acknowledging it, to congratulate themselves on their cleverness, too. It's hard to see why the smug self-regard of this line is any more "challenging" or "subversive" than the basic premise of Wodehouse—that the ruling class are boobs, and their servants are the brains of the operation. Why this should be taken as an endorsement of the class system is a mystery—for years, *M*A*S*H* operated on much the same principle vis-à-vis the military and was never mistaken for a gung-ho flagwaver, perhaps because its authors took the precaution of becoming plonkingly earnest about the whole business.

What seems to be happening is that poor old Americanized Wodehouse, a modest cove who prospered in the democratic hurly-burly of Broadway, is getting the blame for Alan Ayckbourn, who's far more English than Plum ever was. As librettist, lyricist, and director, Ayckbourn has remodeled Bertie and Jeeves according to his own needs. You can't even blame Lloyd Webber: In contrast to the great slurping bombast of his megahits, his self-effacing score here is almost an afterthought—thirteen modest, self-contained songs, some of them in the Tin Pan Alley vernacular of the day, others more lyrical and English, like a summer ballad in an Edwardian garden. There's an unusual unity between music and words here that you don't often find in Lloyd Webber's work. Ayckbourn keeps his lyric ideas simple, but unlike so many Lloyd Webber collaborators he manages to pin 'em to the notes. "Banjo Boy" sounds at first glance like Jolson—"Waitin' for the Robert E. Lee," etc.—but, thinking about it, I suspect Lloyd Webber had in mind early Kern, something like "You're Here and I'm Here" from *The Laughing Husband*, a spirited 2/4 song that prefigures many of the later tricks of the trade. "Half A Moment" is the show's stand-out, a lovely, flowing wistful ballad. For *Phantom* fans, the sole number in Lloyd Webber's lucrative, lush swamping style is "When Love Arrives," which, halfway through, gets sabotaged by a visual gag involving Stinker Pinker and a rosebush that effectively pulls the rug out from the song. Ayckbourn's lyrics are unshowy but with an affectionate detail. The title song is little more than an accumulation of ejaculations—"By all my sainted aunt believes/ By George, by Jove, by Jeeves!"—that starts conventionally enough but gets progressively loopier: "By marzipan/ By butter creams/ By macaroon/ By pudding dreams." Its sharpest line is the acknowledgment by the trio of duffers of "our collective IQ/ Of around 42." But otherwise, if Ayckbourn has studied Wodehouse's own lyrics, he gives little indication.

But then the director/author seems at pains to play down any suggestion that this is even a musical at all. Out of town it was billed as "a diversionary entertainment." But that's too coy for Broadway, so it's now "a musical entertainment." Ayckbourn himself describes it as a play with a few songs. The "few songs" bit is right, but it's not really a play, either. Ayckbourn read the canon, decided any direct adaptation would be

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hopeless and essentially decided to concoct his own Wodehousian plot. The only drawback to this approach is that he didn't work hard enough. The novelist's greatest skill may be as a stylist, but, in order to show off the style, he plotted his books to the millimeter. In *The Code of the Woosters*, for example, Roderick Spode, a late entrant to the crowded field of 'tween-wars European Fascists, forms the Black Shorts.

> "You mean 'shirts,' of course."
>
> "No. By the time Spode formed his association, there were no shirts left. He and his adherents wear black shorts."
>
> "Footer bags, you mean?" [That's to say, rugby shorts.]

Spode doesn't care for Bertie, and the inevitable complications lead to a showdown in which the otherwise apolitical Wooster indulges in an unusually robust bit of analysis: "The trouble with you, Spode, is that just because you have succeeded in inducing a handful of half-wits to disfigure the London scene by going about in black shorts, you think you're someone. You hear them shouting, 'Heil, Spode!' and you imagine it is the Voice of the People. That is where you make your bloomer. What the Voice of the People is saying is: 'Look at that frightful ass Spode swanking about in footer bags! Did you ever in your puff see such a perfect perisher?'" But the would-be Mussolini has a dark secret. He turns out to be, under the alias "Eulalie," a successful designer of ladies' undergarments.

You don't have to have a fascist who's big in ladies' underwear, but, if you're constructing a Wodehouse plot, you have to operate at that level of dottiness. Ayckbourn, a meticulous plotter of dark farces of his own, gives the impression here that he made it up on the hoof on the back of an envelope. Only one moment rises to true Wodehousian invention, and the rest wobbles uneasily between the non-sex jokes of a lowbrow trouser-dropper and the lame sight gags of a provincial pantomime. Nothing that's going on justifies the two-and-a-half hours it takes to plod through to the finale. And, though Jeeves amusingly announces at a critical juncture, "We appear to have run out of narrative," to be honest he could have said as much ninety minutes earlier. By the time we reach the point where Bertie is being pursued by the entire cast in novelty pyjamas, the penny has dropped. Lloyd Webber and Ayckbourn have used Wodehouse as a pretext for a show celebrating the charm of amateurishness.

No wonder the critics sniffed it was "too English." Broadway will import anything from Britain except the genial amateur shambles. "Hey, let's do the show right here in the barn!" may be an enduring battle cry on the Great White Way, but what they mean is, even if it's in a cowshed, it's got to have a full orchestra and professional choreography and fancy costumes and leggy gals. *By Jeeves*, with its dull set and fake props, offends against the very spirit of Broadway: "You're going out there a youngster but you've got to come back a star!" The message of *By Jeeves* is: You're going out there a youngster but you've got to mooch about for a couple of hours and muddle through. What's British about *By Jeeves* is not the source material but the debt it owes to other celebrations of amateurishness going back to the classic of the genre, Julian Slade's *Salad Days*, which was the biggest hit of the 1950s in England but couldn't run ten minutes in New York.

Andrew Lloyd Webber invented a school of "British musical" that might as well have landed from Planet Zongo for all it had to say about Britain: Bible rock, Latin-American dictators, singing felines, anything, absolutely anything, other than anything British in form or content. If he manages to sell a Broadway audience on this ragged mess, he'll have pulled off the most unlikely Brit hit of all. And bizarrely, while the critics may have had a grumpy time, on the night I caught *By Jeeves* the audience was chuckling away merrily.

Oh, and a quarter-century on, he's taken Wodehouse's advice: Jeeves doesn't sing.

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Art

Gallery chronicle

by Daniel Kunitz

One could say that John Koch (1909–1978) painted as if modernism—Manet included—simply never occurred, but such a statement fails to account for the vehemence of his rejection of most twentieth-century art and the pointedness of his rebellion against it. Neither naïve nor provincial, but rather an urbane New Yorker who was part of a sophisticated Upper West Side cultural milieu, Koch worked during the ascendancy of the New York avant garde. He was entirely aware of the art he rejected and knew exactly how he didn't want to paint. Indeed, in 1960, he, along with such artists as Edward Hopper and Raphael Soyer, took part in protests against the Whitney Museum's exclusion of figurative art from its shows. The extent to which they failed to influence curatorial thinking forty years ago can be measured by the fact that Koch's current retrospective, "Painting a New York Life," appears at The New-York Historical Society and not at an art museum.[1]

In certain ways, the Historical Society is a proper venue for this show. A realist in the Dutch seventeenth-century sense rather than in the French nineteenth-century sense, Koch created paintings that are historical, recollective, and anecdotal. Instead of transfiguring, they aim at recording life, and, like photographs, they do so by capturing in oil paint the effects of light. Though not formally trained, Koch was a magnificent technician, able to render light and shadow, warmth and coolness with a precision worthy of the Dutch masters whom he revered. At times, he even managed to use his decidedly old-fashioned approach to make paintings that have a surprising, and challenging, freshness, as in *The Accident # 1* (1968), in which the artist and his nude model—both seen from the back—stand at an open studio window looking down to the street where an accident has just occurred. This small canvas is a virtual compendium of the pictorial strategies Koch used in his best work. Based on a real event, the painting reconstructs the scene, including, as do many of the paintings, the figure of the artist himself, as well as his palette and easel, a small mirror balanced on a trashcan, and a single red element—a robe—tossed carelessly on a bed. The mirror, in particular, is a crucial motif for Koch and stands as a symbol of the paradox of an artist who consistently employed imaginative reconstructions in representing real events and people. The celebrated *Cocktail Party* (1956), which depicts the Kochs and their circle of artist and musician friends, strikes me as having more historical than artistic interest. I prefer the more complex work, the scenes of the artist and his models, and those of men and women in domestic settings. The commercial portraits, while they merit inclusion on docu-

1 "John Koch: Painting a New York Life" opened at The New-York Historical Society on October 16, 2001 and remains on view until January 27, 2002.

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mentary grounds, do little to enhance Koch's artistic stature.

Unlike Koch, a New Yorker who remained aloof from his city's avant-garde, his near contemporary Morris Louis (1912–1962) nurtured a lifelong distrust for the city, yet maintained a keen dialogue with the cutting-edge painting produced by its denizens. Louis is, of course, famous for initiating abstract stain painting, a technique influenced by Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea* and Jackson Pollock's black Duco paintings of 1951–52. His show of nine enchanting and frankly beautiful canvases at Paul Kasmin Gallery[2] includes three works from his second *Veils* series of 1958, two from the *Florals* series of 1959–1960, two from the *Unfurleds* series of 1960–1961, and two from the *Stripes* series of 1961–1962—a compact survey of Louis's most fecund period. He created all of his work after 1954 by spilling diluted Magna, an acrylic resin, onto untreated canvases, which he then manipulated to create his skeins and stripes—abstract images that collapse color and drawing.

In the *Veils* on view, color takes a back seat to form and line, lurking behind wide translucent curtains of brownish-to-charcoal pigment washes that flow in a tapering mass from near the top edges of the canvas down to footlike reservoirs at the bottom edge. From the top and sides of the darker pigments of *Dalet Yad* (1958), areas of orange, yellow, and blue pigment erupt like liquid forced to the edges under a heavy plate. Two lines imprinted by the underlying supports divide the somber veil into three uneven sections. Only in *Green Shade* (1958), with its light and dark green hues and stalagmitic pours jutting in counterpoint to the downward tapering at the edges, does the veil truly begin to reveal the colors beneath. By 1959, in such a work as *Para III*, refulgent hues—in diagonal streams of blue, red, yellow, orange, and green—master the entire canvas, eliminating any sense of figure and ground, and banishing the darkest, blob-like, pooling pigments to the canvas's left edge. The *Unfurleds* find Louis corralling his pigments into vertical pours, either in columns, as in *Aqua* (1960), or in the gracefully curving and tapering pours of *Lambda II* (1960). These pours, by 1961, straighten and crowd together in the somewhat more austere *Stripes*. To find similarly innovative, aesthetically urgent abstractions in a living painter this season, one had to stop by Gerhard Richter's outstanding show at Marian Goodman Gallery. Still, some forty years after his death, Louis's paintings remain unsurpassed in their elegance and in the excitement of their formal inventions.

Among contemporary realists, Catherine Murphy is certainly one of the deftest confounders of straightforward representation. Taken as a whole, the eight oils on canvas and two graphite drawings at Lennon, Weinberg[3] were, either allegorically or directly, paintings about painting. This might seem hopelessly solipsistic if it weren't for the fact that the broad theme dovetails so well with her pictorial strategies. Virtually all of the paintings play with surfaces—a window screen, wallpaper, tablecloth, crumpled paper, a fogged window—in a pictorial imitation of the literal picture plane. The two oils that directly address painting, *Cardboard Palette* (2001) and *Getting Set Up* (2000), display a rather literal-minded simplicity that succeeded far better in the pencil drawing *Swept Up* (1999)—a drawing that attends to the detritus of the artistic process: pencil shavings, string, leaves, and other trash. *Cardboard Palette* takes the cardboard itself as the ground of the picture, upon which Murphy reproduces, flatly, with no impasto, the modeled terrain of paint blobs on one of her palettes.

2 "Morris Louis" opened at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, on October 11 and will remain on view until December 22, 2001.

3 "Catherine Murphy: Paintings and Drawings 1999–2001" was on view at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc., New York, from September 22 to November 3, 2001.

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(When painting, Murphy always uses a fresh palette of cardboard for each work.) She does not, however, establish a dynamic tension through the topography of massed pigments. Rather, her smooth, flat paint handling and uninspired colors result in a somewhat static image.

The strongest works on view were those that addressed painting far more obliquely. In *Cathy* (2001), one sees, as if from indoors, a fogged-over window on which someone has written with her finger the name "Cathy," so that the letters appear backwards, like mirror-writing. We know we are inside looking out because trees are visible along the edges, where the fog has evaporated. The sensuous, though flat, paint application counterbalances effectively the wry manner in which Murphy positions the viewer inside, or behind, the picture plane, instead of "outside" looking into the painting. Similarly, *The Windsor* (1999) substitutes the image of a used tablecloth from an establishment called The Windsor (also a brand of paints) for a canvas, with food stains and crumbs standing in for pigments. It is this willingness to challenge viewers both intellectually and formally that is so lacking in the kitsch-befuddled representational painting one sees in galleries today.

This may sound like a somewhat forced observation, but, seen through a doorway, a section of Richard Serra's enormous, weatherproofed steel *Torqued Spiral* (2001) resembles to an uncommon degree one of Morris Louis's *Veil* paintings. Both have an analogously somber coloration, vertical striations (in Serra's case caused by the weatherproofing of the steel), and a rounded, inwardly tapering image, or, in the case of the sculpture, mass of steel. In fact, the similarities are less of a stretch than one might think. Serra shares with Louis a remarkably high level of ambition and achievement; more importantly, both artists succeed by seductively unifying grandiosity and delicacy.

Serra's recent show at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea[4] is, contrary to the catalogue essay by Hal Foster, less a departure from previous work than a glorious continuation of the artist's best recent pieces, his arcs and torqued ellipses, and a humdrum recapitulation of his worst older work, the process-art blocks and cubes. About the latter—in this show represented by two works—I can find little to say. *Elevational Wedge* (2001) is a wedge of rolled steel placed in its own room on the gallery floor. *Ali-Frazier* (2001) comprises two almost identical forged blocks of weatherproof steel placed in separate though identical rooms. One could come up with all sorts of theoretical claptrap to justify these pieces (and Foster does), yet nothing can mitigate their aesthetic dullness. These works appear even less successful when placed in close proximity to the, at times terrifying yet always enrapturing, other sculptures on view.

The two torqued spirals—*Bellamy* (2001) and *Sylvester* (2001)—named for Serra's recently deceased friends, the dealer and curator Dick Bellamy and the English art critic David Sylvester, are both approximately thirteen feet high and are composed of plates of two-inch thick weatherproofed steel. Unlike traditional sculpture, which one views by circling the piece, these works are meant to be entered, to be seen by those circling through them. The viewer must experience the constriction of the whorls, the way the walls on either side curve at points and arrive, finally, at the sanctuarial open space at the center. And, while walking around or through the spirals, one confronts the unfurling, painterly drips and striations of the rust-proofing (which, again, bears comparison with Louis's work on unsized canvases). *Bellamy* and *Sylvester* are extremely similar companion pieces; the other two works on view, *Betwixt the Torus and the Sphere* (2001) and *Union of the Torus and the Sphere* (2001) are, as their titles indi-

4 "Richard Serra: Torqued Spirals, Toruses and Spheres" opened at Gagosian Gallery, New York, on October 18 and will remain on view until December 15, 2001.

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cate, paired opposites. The nearly twelve-feet high *Union* fuses a plane from a sphere with a plane from a torus (a doughnut-like shape) into something like the hull of a ship. At the same height, *Betwixt* lines up three spherical sections alternating with three torus sections in a row, so that the viewer must walk around and up through the rows to see the entire piece. Austere and possessing a Euclidean perfection, these outsized, multi-dimensional statements provide a fitting rebuke to the fussy "environments" and puerile installations that have, in recent years, co-opted the art of sculpture.

Exhibition note

"Along the Nile:
Early Photographs of Egypt,"
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. September 11–
December 30, 2001

Unlike the *Déscription de L'Egypte*—the engraved and textual squawk-box published between 1809 and 1828—the early photographs of Egypt, from a generation later, speak in whispers. Their stark imagery confronts the viewer with a sphinx's indifference. Maxime du Camp at Abu Simbel (1850), Félix Teynard at the Island of Philae (1851–52), John Beasley Greene on the Nile (1853–54), Francis Frith at the Pyramids of El-Geezeh (1858): these are the scenes of a midcentury desert mystery.

The period of photography selected for "Along the Nile," roughly 1840 to 1870, presents a ranging view of half-light, half-knowing, and half-truths. The images land somewhere between romance and reality. Giza to Luxor, Dakka to the Valley of the Kings, the ancient monuments in these photographs are crisp, but the contemporary figures blur. With long exposure, one might say the very emotions get fuzzy. The photographs look deserted, even for the desert. Cropped and other-worldly, what we see is more like a lunar landscape for the nineteenth century, orientalism passed through a pinhole, a spectral light, a desert vacuumed clean. Whether these prints communicate an aspect of the sentimental, or unsentimental, or mixed emotions of their European buying public is anyone's guess. The picture is not altogether clear. Perhaps this is the point.

Culled from the collection of the Gilman Paper Company, the forty-five prints assembled here are arranged by date. Included are the big names—Du Camp (French), Greene (American, active in France), Teynard (French), Frith (British). There are also a number of lesser-knowns: the German Ernest Benecke (active in France), Gustave Le Gray (French), Félix Bonfils (French), Louis de Clercq (French), Wilhelm Hammerschmidt (German). But even the internationalism of the show presents an enigma. Just when you see the semblance of national painting styles, the system falls flat. Teynard's archaeological gaze, Greene's sublime landscapes, Benecke's ethnography: there is more here than meets the eye.

Co-curated by the Gilman collection's Pierre Apraxine, the show regrettably has been destined for the Howard Gilman Gallery, a dim warren. The gallery is hard to find, and the show is easily confused with a simultaneous exhibition called "The Pharaoh's Photographer" in the first-floor Lila Acheson Wallace Galleries of Egyptian Art. Small and intimate, the Gilman Gallery is also poorly positioned to take on anything of large scale and wide scope, which "Along the Nile" demands.

In fact, the Metropolitan has given over little to this exhibition. There is no catalogue, only a small brochure. The show's wall texts alternate between lean and timid, overly concerned with the development of photographic chemistry (salted paper prints and paper negatives in the 1840s and 1850s, glass-plate technology in the 1860s). As for historic or artistic context, little gets said. This is a story that does not tell itself.

Most likely, the inquisitive viewer will turn to Flaubert's 1849–50 travel notes from Egypt, translated by Francis Steegmuller

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and widely available in the Penguin Classics edition called *Flaubert in Egypt*. (A few notes from his friend and fellow traveler Maxime du Camp have also been collected in this volume.) Positioned against the photographs themselves, however, even the young Flaubert seems out of sync and unrewarding. (For an opposing reaction, see Michael Kimmelman's fulsome review in *The New York Times*.) Written in the tradition of Vivant Denon's *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte* (1802) and to a lesser extent Constantin-François Volney's *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie* (1821), Flaubert's chatty notes speak little to the empty images before us at the Met. It is perhaps in the bleakness of *Madame Bovary* (1856), the kiss-off of romantic ambition, that Flaubert finally translated his visions from Giza and Thebes.

As a grammar, photography is not in the present tense but always a past participle. Where engraved material like the *Déscription de L'Egypte* presented an idealized vision and memory-theater of the Orient, in the photograph what you see is what you get, or more precisely what you saw is what you got. The early photographs of Egypt reveal a kind of emulsified lost time.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Egypt was no longer carrying on the spirit of 1789 and contending with the Ottoman Empire. It was fast becoming France's cotton belt (the modern cash crop was first imported by Mehemet Ali Pasha in 1821). Intensified trade, modernization and public works, the Suez Canal, and international debt were soon to follow. Tourism, likewise, which was already in full swing when Flaubert arrived in Cairo (note the international guests in the Hôtel du Nil), would only redouble. Thomas Cook would soon begin his cruise-line approach to travel, offering his first tour of the Nile in 1869. It is worthwhile to note that Hammerschmidt and Bonfils, two of the last photographers in the exhibition, were among the first to set up full-scale studios in Egypt, offering their images for sale not in London or Paris but in Cairo. These photographs were destined for travel souvenirs, those symbolic nothings, a suitable end-point for the show. This is truly an Orient at light speed, where time gets bent, and the ground is no longer firm.

—James Panero

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

In mid-October, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra visited Carnegie Hall for what amounted to a mini-Wagner festival. On the first night, there were excerpts from *Götterdämmerung*. On the second night, there was Act I of *Die Walküre*. On the third and final night, there was *Tristan und Isolde*, complete. Thus did we experience Bayreuth on Fifty-seventh Street.

But it wasn't all Wagner, for the conductor, Daniel Barenboim, held a couple of wild cards. Night One began with Bruch's *Kol Nidrei* for cello and orchestra, played by Yo-Yo Ma "in memory of Isaac Stern." (The beloved violinist had died a few weeks before.) Ma played in his usual soupy, emotive style, but the piece bore it well.

Next was Elliott Carter's Cello Concerto, written last year with Ma in mind. Carter is a sprightly ninety-three, still composing like himself, and bounding (or almost bounding) onto the stage after premieres. His new concerto is, indeed, Carterian: energetic, busy, propulsive. The soloist's part is quite challenging, and Ma handled it well. It was odd that he hadn't memorized the piece—one written especially for him, and receiving its New York premiere. It cannot, at this point, be as familiar to him as, say, the Haydns, but still . . .

The *Götterdämmerung* excerpts were typical Barenboim, and this conductor is a worthy interpreter of Wagner. The playing was often visceral, aggressive, and thrilling—"vertical" Wagner, all up and down, rather than "horizontal," more continuous. It was rather heavy Wagner, too. Sometimes it was overly blunt, lacking in mystery. Barenboim is prone to conducting this music as a football coach might—which is not as negative an appraisal as it might first appear. Usually, Barenboim's Wagner is rich, glorying, and bold. On this night, the horn section was a mess, which was surprising for such a blue-ribbon bunch. Principal clarinetist Larry Combs, however, was elegant and assured.

Coming on for Brünnhilde's Immolation Scene was the veteran Wagner soprano Elizabeth Connell. She, too, had the score in front of her, which was astonishing, for music so familiar, especially to such a singer. Her voice has perhaps seen better days, but it is still an exceptional one. Connell has the ability—critical in Wagner—to create a beautiful wall of sound. Her voice has a good cutting quality, too. Her breathing seemed just slightly shallow, making for difficulty on high notes, but she produced some truly lovely lyrical singing.

On Night Two, Barenboim began with a new piano-and-orchestra piece by Isabel Mundry, a German composer in her thirties. Actually, he began with a lecture about it—a lecture that lasted fifteen minutes, which is roughly the duration of the piece itself. This might have been taken as an insult to the composer, really: a work that requires such an explanation is almost apologized for, and degraded. A piece rises or falls on its own, without special pleading.

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The lecture might have been taken as an insult to the audience, too, and a waste of its time. Latecomers, seated in time to hear the piece but not the lecture, were lucky.

But not all that lucky. The piece—called *Panorama Ciego*, and performed by Barenboim as both pianist and conductor—is a horrorscape. In this, it is like countless other works composed today: bleak, hopeless, ghastly. Whatever the composer intended, the music is the stuff of nightmares, though not compelling nightmares, artistically. This is a sparse piece, consisting of few notes and little inspiration. It is of mild technical interest: but that hardly suffices, no matter how much lecturing the listener is subjected to. It's funny that in a time of peace and plenty (that is, before September 11) there is so much fashionable despair in new music. One annoying thing about today's composers is that they consider themselves daring and different; yet—to indulge a generalization—there is a depressing sameness about them, at least as much as exists between, say, any two Renaissance composers.

As for Act I of *Die Walküre*, it is, in a way, a complete work unto itself (just as *Die Walküre* as a whole can be nicely separated from *The Ring*). No wonder orchestras have long liked to use it on concert programs. It requires three singers: a soprano, a tenor, and a bass, who on this evening were Angela Denoke, Peter Seifert, and John Tomlinson. Denoke is a competent singer, but she was wanting in strength and vitality. She was at her best in the score's quiet, songlike moments. The tenor, Seifert, was the reverse: a little rough and unsteady in the serene passages, quite good in the more heroic ones. His singing in general was strong and relaxed. Impressively, he landed directly on the top of a note, with no sliding up to it, or fishing around for it.

Tomlinson had the least of the roles—Hunding—and he all but stole the show. He is a formidable Wagnerian, as he proved last season in the Metropolitan Opera's *Parsifal*. He is both precise and dramatically compelling. His singing is elegant, rounded, and polished. Also, his semi-acting on Carnegie's stage was just right for opera-in-concert. Last, I cannot forbear mentioning that Tomlinson, at this juncture of his life, looks amazingly like Brahms, in pictures of the composer in his later years. You would think he had come from some look-alike agency—not that there would be much call for Brahms.

Night Three's starring pair were Waltraud Meier as Isolde and Christian Franz as Tristan. Meier is a much celebrated Wagnerian, Franz little known, at least in this country. Meier started out brilliantly, throwing off fire, giving practically a singing lesson: a lesson in breathing, phrasing, and Isolde electricity. She weakened, though, showing that years of performing this strenuous music have taken their toll. This toll was most evident in *mezzo-forte* or *piano* passages. And the middle and lower registers of her voice betrayed her, even as the top remained true.

Franz could barely handle the part of Tristan. We should remember, however, that this is a difficult part to fill, and that any tenor who assays it deserves some measure of appreciation. Franz was, by and large, workmanlike. His intonation was poor, and this may have affected Meier, whose intonation suffered in their love duet—a duet utterly lacking in the ecstasy and rapture it should have. (This was partly the fault of Barenboim, who had a dismayingly lackluster night.)

And I must mention Nadja Michael, who sang Brangäne, Isolde's faithful aide. Michael boasts an enormous, beautiful mezzo that will soon be sought on the world's operatic stages. Her sound is a little diffuse, needing a speck of focus, and—believe it or not—she at times deployed too much volume for this house. But the young German—whose lavish physical beauty will do her no harm—had the crowd on its ear.

Visiting Carnegie Hall a couple of weeks later was the pianist Evgeny Kissin, the wunderkind—or former wunderkind—from Russia. This year he hit the big three-oh,

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which is startling, considering that just yesterday, or so it seems, he was that virtuosic, serious-faced boy in the Young Pioneers scarf.

Kissin is still virtuosic and serious-faced, and his program was of the kind you might have heard from a touring lion in, say, 1928. He began with Busoni's arrangement of Bach's Toccata in C major, BWV 564, a piece that used to be in many pianists' repertoire; it was a favorite of Rubinstein and Horowitz, to name only the two most famous. Kissin played the work with great majesty, giving Bach the grand treatment. Kissin can be oddly unexpressive and unfeeling. He is liable to bull his way through a phrase or section, without nuance or enjoyment. Yet he did some effective things in the Bach-Busoni, and he was, as always, fearsomely accurate. And it was a pure and unguilty pleasure to hear this transcription again—a throwback to a different age of concertizing, before the originalist commissars and killjoys came in.

Next on the program was Schumann's Sonata No. 1, another "old-fashioned" work requiring prodigious technique. To this Kissin brought just the right Romantic temperament. He clearly understood the arc of the piece, unifying the various episodes. He is especially skilled at playing dense passages with clarity. And he can play explosively without banging. The entire performance revealed true maturity and supreme control. I should record that I have been ferociously critical of this pianist in the past—I remember some appalling Beethoven and Brahms, in particular—but there is no denying that this was great playing.

The second half of the recital was given over to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Kissin occasionally slapped at the keyboard, and pounded, as he is wont to do, and he was a little headlong, interpretively. But there were some hair-raising moments here, and Kissin was again in command. The aura of throwback continued with such encores as Rachmaninoff's arrangement of the Scherzo from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Liszt's *Rigoletto* Paraphrase (the latter of which contained some of the most limpid passagework you will ever hear on the piano). The audience roared as they might have for Liszt himself, and the young man deserved it.

One of the Met's new productions this season is *Luisa Miller*, an example of "middle Verdi" (or "second-period Verdi," if you like). Met capo James Levine conducts this music with great affection and devotion, making the best possible case for it (even if that case isn't quite good enough). Under his baton, the overture—one of the more admirable features of *Luisa Miller*—was taut, brisk, and well-defined. It was an overture of tense and bloody power, prefiguring a tense and bloody story. In the title role was Marina Mescheriakova, a soprano of pleasant if undistinguished voice. She has sufficient power for the part, and she can handle the coloratura adequately. Diction, however, was a problem.

Nikolai Putilin, who sang Luisa's father, is a sturdy Russian baritone, in the tradition of such baritones (and basses). His intonation was absent—he was perpetually flat on upper notes—but his all-around professionalism compensated. Hao Jiang Tian, as the Count, showed off a juicy bass, and another bass, Phillip Ens, as Wurm, was positively splendid: smooth-voiced and arresting. Ens is a Canadian—somewhat reminiscent of the baritone Thomas Hampson—who should enjoy a big career. The much praised mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, as Federica, was a disappointment: prosaic, unconvincing, and musically and technically indifferent.

The inarguable star, singing gloriously, was the tenor Neil Shicoff. For at least twenty-five years he has been singing this way, and he still looks remarkably youthful, lucky guy. He was actually believable as Luisa's tragic young suitor, Rodolfo. His singing was ringing and heroic, well-formed and focused. He strained just a little, but never to the point of ugliness. The part is heavy: high-lying and punishing. Has Shicoff now shifted to these heavier roles?

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And if he has, can he do *Luisa*'s Rodolfo and still be fresh and agile for *Bohème*'s? The big moment of the night is the aria "Quando le sere al placido," which Shicoff performed resplendently—reminding one that, in the age of Pavarotti and Domingo, one must not forget Shicoff, a tenor of versatility, consistency, and excellence.

In early November, Anne-Sophie Mutter took up residence in Carnegie Hall for three concerts with the Camerata Salzburg. The first two were all-Mozart, consisting of the five violin concertos and the Sinfonia Concertante (for violin and viola). The Camerata Salzburg appeared as one of those riderless horses—a chamber orchestra without conductor. Whatever the reason—and this riderlessness is a top candidate—the group was sloppy and adrift.

Mutter herself was not exactly a model of musical discipline either. She is an uneven violinist, and the concert I attended showed her at what is probably her worst. In the Concerto No. 4 in D, she was rushed and inexact—or then, she was overly languid or self-indulgent (and still inexact). The opening Allegro had little definition. The Andante was, for the most part, lovely, and extremely Romantic—almost impermissibly so. The Rondeau had some character—but tempo (or rather, tempos) again fluctuated disconcertingly.

It was more of the same in the beloved Concerto No. 3 in G. (The pieces were not played in numerical order.) As for the Sinfonia Concertante—performed with the violist Yuri Bashmet—it was a disaster of technical ineptitude and musical misconception. It was uncoordinated, unthinking, and unworthy of Mozart. The playing did not meet professional standards, to say nothing of world-class ones. Mutter is undoubtedly a looker—a fact exploited relentlessly in the marketing of her—but on some occasions she simply fails to live up to the musical claims perpetually made for her.

On more solid footing was the twenty-year-old American violinist Sarah Chang, in her engagement with the New York Philharmonic and its soon-to-be-leaving music director, Kurt Masur. Their concerto was the Berg, one of the staples of the twentieth-century repertory (and a piece that Anne-Sophie Mutter happens to be capable of playing superbly). Chang gave the concerto a sensitive reading, strongly supported—even led—by Masur, whose understanding of this score is solid. The young lady's sound is at times indistinct and rather weak, but her technique is plentiful, and she traversed the Berg with a modernism both fiery and cool, angular and lyrical. I have mentioned before that we are awash in fine young violinists, whatever our deficiencies in other areas: Chang is one such violinist.

After intermission, Masur and the orchestra did the Bruckner Ninth Symphony, that composer's last testament, and one of the best—most moving—of all symphonies. It is almost enough to say here that Masur grasps the architecture of the piece, and that the orchestra executed both blazingly and profoundly. Masur is simply one of the most faithful and most effective Bruckner conductors we have, and he brought out from this work its passion, playfulness, sweet sorrow, joy, and spiritual vitality. The horn section—and the brass generally—outdid themselves. Other sections were hardly less impressive. The symphony ended in its peace of E major, the struggle having passed.

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Music

"Dallas" auf Deutsch

by Alexander Coleman

If the tenor of the vast abundance of books about the works of Richard Wagner is indicative of anything, it is that it is impossible to approach the man and his work with a light heart. His operas impose on any listener a profound seriousness along with a sense of awed disbelief that all of this could have been the product of a single mind (and this simple declaration concerning Wagner's operas does not even register his multifaceted activities outside of the realm of music—as critic and theoretician of the arts, politician, theater designer, and all-around maverick).

Wagner himself would surely consider this earnest critical attention richly deserved—he was more than tolerant of disciples and even sycophants. Yet his wild personality has long since disappeared into the depths of scholarly adulation. The diaries of his second wife, Cosima Liszt Wagner, first published in 1976 after many vicissitudes, reveal a breezy and nonchalant man, of whose antics she disapproved. The diaries show a doting father who clambered up trees with his children, loved games and parlor theater, and seems an untrammeled spirit given to elaborate pranks and dreadful puns, as well as a voracious reader of Western literature from Homer on.

The outlines of Wagner's life and times were firmly established by Ernest Newman in his four-volume *Life of Richard Wagner* (1933–1947), a work that has been only partially supplanted by the recent one-volume treatments of Robert W. Gutman (1968), Martin Gregor-Dellin (1983), and Barry Millington (1999). Inevitably, given the recent course of cultural criticism, certain aspects of Wagner have lately been intensely scrutinized: for instance, his notorious anti-Semitism—see *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* by Marc A. Weiner (1995)—or the sexual orientations of his operatic characters—see *Wagner Androgyne* by Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1993). And even more inevitably, given the ongoing debasement of our culture, we now have such productions as the EMI CD entitled *Wagner for Dummies* or, on a more intelligent and detailed level, William Berger's book *Wagner Without Fear: Learning to Love—and Even Enjoy—Opera's Most Demanding Genius* (1998). The various works about Wagner by the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts' intermission star M. Owen Lee—most recently his *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art* (1999)—are sound and well-written.

Wagner's legacy would have been far more complex than most composers' even if he had not designed and built his own festival opera house (plus a home for himself and his family) in the small Franconian town of Bayreuth. The generally received opinion of music lovers is that this is madness in the form of an opera house—for instance, Mr. Frederic Spotts, author of a highly engaging history of the Bayreuth festival, noted that "To compose a fifteen-

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hour opera, construct a theatre solely for its performance and invite the world to attend was derided by some as vanity to the point of insanity." In 1872 a Munich analyst published a study of Wagner's personality concluding that he was "suffering from 'chronic megalomania, paranoia, ambiguous ideas and moral derangement.'" But there were plenty of fervid advocates who saw Wagner as a combination of the talents of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Beethoven, and moreover as an incarnation of the heroic Teutonic spirit, a musical nationalist representing the newly united Germany.

Wagner broke all the rules as he designed his ideal theater and created the incomparable acoustics at Bayreuth: singers are heard with bell-like clarity no matter what is going on in the orchestra. The Festspielhaus was envisioned as a temporary structure, however, thrown together as a prototype for a more permanent edifice. "Flimsy" is the only word for it, a carpenter's dream made entirely of pine, fir, and maple. The only twentieth-century alteration was the substitution in the 1950s of steel girders to take the place of a few perilously rotten beams. The auditorium resembles a descending Greek amphitheater and seats just under two-thousand. There is no carpet along the aisles, just bare wood. Both orchestra and conductor are invisible, hidden by an enormous hooded shell to prevent light from entering the auditorium and to throw the sound back into the gigantic double proscenium stage so that it first mixes with the singers, bounces off the back wall, and only then reaches the audience.

The orchestra pit consists of nine descending straight rows of musicians, more than half of whom must play at the lowest levels of the pit under the stage. The first violins are placed to the right of the conductor, the cellos and basses interspersed throughout the strings for a greater blend. The orchestra sounds muffled in the house, intentionally subordinate to the singers. And there are almost insurmountable difficulties in coordination between pit and stage—many musicians can't see the conductor, and others can't hear any singing. The singers see only the violins and the conductor. (These days, video monitors are an invaluable aid.) The sound bounces around the theater so that one cannot point to the source, probably due to the fact that the space underneath the thirty rows of seats is an empty wedge of air, and the wall columns are hollow. One last oddity: the ceiling is made of painted stretched sailcloth. Though most performances take place in July and August, air conditioning was and is unthinkable. The silence and concentration of the audience at Bayreuth has always been extraordinary—the "Bayreuth hush" really does exist—and this is precisely what Wagner wanted, no more of the unending chitchat in the boxes as at La Scala or Charles Garnier's Paris Opera. As Mark Twain dolefully noted in 1891, "You seem to sit with the dead in the gloom of a tomb."

After Wagner's death in Venice on February 13, 1883, the very existence of the festival was imperiled. Wagner left no will, and a considerable sector of nationalistic Wagnerians considered the widow Cosima unfit to carry on; she wasn't "German" at all, but of Hungarian and French parentage. But with an indomitable will and intimate knowledge of Wagnerian musical and theatrical ideals, she governed the festival with an iron fist until 1906, when she handed the direction over to her son Siegfried. He was thirty-seven years old, a not untalented composer himself and a clever producer, who directed the fortunes of Bayreuth through the dark days of the Great War and the subsequent revival in 1924. But he died in 1930, just four months after his mother Cosima. This is the date from which to start a recounting of what some German wags, addicted to reruns of old American television serials, describe as "Dallas auf Deutsch," the unseemly and savage story of the Wagner family's management of the Bayreuth Festival.

Siegfried, Richard and Cosima's only son, had been an ebullient bachelor, continually postponing the duties of marriage and the fathering of children suitable to continue

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the Wagnerian tradition. What's more, he led an openly gay life, often travelling with young English gentlemen and passing off the frequent blackmail attempts to the festival treasurer, an adept at resolving these matters. Cosima was kept unaware. In 1915, the constant pressure from his mother for more fruitful domestic arrangements finally had its effect. Siegfried, aged forty-six, married the seventeen-year-old English orphan Winifred Williams, who at that time was under the guardianship of the Klindworth family, esteemed visitors at Bayreuth for many years. Four children were born: Wieland (1917), Friedelind (1918), Wolfgang (1919), and Verena (1920). The pattern established by Cosima was about to be repeated—an outsider was to invade, take over, and finally dominate Bayreuth. After Siegfried's sudden death in 1930, Winifred took over the festival and carried on until the Allied de-Nazification proceedings wrested control from her hands. Still it remained in the family with the two brothers firmly in charge when the festival reopened in 1951. It should be noted that Siegfried, liberal and free of prejudice, handed the festival over to all of his children in his will, but in the confusion following World War II, the two sons conspired with Winifred to deny the daughters any role.

I had an embarrassing but, in the end, happy encounter with Friedelind Wagner, one of Siegfried's daughters, during a brief visit to Bayreuth in June 1962. At that time, I was unencumbered by any knowledge of the recent Wagner generations and the ongoing conflicts between the three elements of the struggle—mother, daughters, and sons. The owner of the pension where I was lodged told me that, although the festival had not formally begun its performances, I might be able to attend an afternoon rehearsal—*Tannhäuser*, as it happenned, conducted by the young Wolfgang Sawallisch. This affable lady informed me that, since I was an American, I should approach the Wagner grandchild who was in charge of "*die Amerikaner*," Frau Friedelind Wagner. She gave me Friedelind's address. I composed what must have been a highly garbled and ungrammatical letter in German, hoping that I might be accorded a pass to a rehearsal the next day. Having hand-delivered the letter, I was informed back at the pension that Frau Wagner would see me at ten the next morning.

At the appointed hour, Friedelind Wagner, with her unmistakable Wagnerian visage, descended the stairs with *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The International Herald Tribune* under her arm. With the most disarming of accents, she said to me in pure Brooklynese, "Ya' know, I don't know why you wrote that letter to me in German. I've been living in Brooklyn since 1940." Years later, having finally found a copy of her stunning memoir, *Heritage of Fire* (1945), I discovered that she had always been considered the black sheep of the family, a valiant anti-Nazi who finally left Bayreuth because of her outspoken criticism of its Hitlerization. Indeed, as the last harrowing pages of that memoir demonstrate, her mother Winifred warned her in no uncertain terms: "You must stop talking, and if these measures fail the order will be given; you will be destroyed and exterminated [*austilgen und ausrotten*] at the first opportunity."

With the aid of Arturo Toscanini, who had shown great sympathy to her over the years, she escaped, made her way to Buenos Aires, and later arrived at La Guardia with Mr. and Mrs. Toscanini in 1940, applying for American citizenship. For many of the war years when things were really desperate, she earned her living by waiting on tables at Schrafft's. Needless to say, her postwar years as a visitor and sometime leader of master classes at Bayreuth were fraught with difficulty. Her mother never forgave her daughter, a "traitor to the fatherland," and her two brothers barely acknowledged her presence. In any case she was the motherly sponsor of many American singers after the war. John Rockwell's obituary in *The New York Times* of May 8, 1991 speaks of Friedelind's "gypsylike odyssey as she fruit-

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lessly attempted to find support for her dream of a theatrical academy." Thwarted both in New York and at Bayreuth, she ordered that her ashes be scattered near her home in Lucerne. Among the Friedelind Wagner papers at the Fales Library of New York University, there is a glossy photograph of mother and daughter, more or less smiling at each other, obviously at a moment of uneasy truce. It is dated Bayreuth, 1966, one year before Friedelind was ordered to cease her summer master classes. It is signed by both mother and daughter. The mother must have signed first, since the daughter has added a sardonic comment. It reads: "To Tom [a New York friend], Lo! It's love from this summer's living monster. Friedelind." Obviously, the reference is to mother Winifred.

One of the recent witnesses to this ongoing family saga is Wieland's daughter, Nike Wagner. Ms. Wagner has recently published an overview of the past and present battles for succession at Bayreuth: *The Wagners: The Dramas of a Musical Dynasty*.[1] It is not for nothing that Nike Wagner earned a doctorate at Northwestern University, producing a dissertation on Karl Kraus guided by the eminent scholar Erich Heller. In the first half of the book, Ms. Wagner presents us with essays on the operas and a many-layered history of their presentation. She is especially vivid in describing Wieland's "house cleaning" (*Entrümpelung*) after the war—sets for *Die Meistersinger*, for instance, without half-timbered houses, no cobbler's pegs, no grandiose processions of the craft guilds, no nationalistic paeans to "Holy German Art." His *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal* were equally shocking and refreshing, and incited endless controversy between traditionalists and innovators.

She is also highly original in her speculations on the matter of incest in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and on the influence of Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903) in the ongoing reinterpretation of sexuality and misogyny in *Parsifal*. This section of the book is a vivid and detailed defense of her father's work at Bayreuth from 1951 until his premature death in 1966. Wieland's revolutionary stagecraft completely broke with the theatrical ideologies of the past, above all by the substitution of the economy of means for the kitschy spectacles so dear to Hitler's taste.

If there is a hovering, heroic figure in Nike's book, it is surely her aunt Friedelind, who receives this considerable accolade:

> Her early experience of alienation from Wahnfried [the family home at Bayreuth] and from the "primal horde of the family" were undoubtedly painful for her; at the same time, though, they gave her the detachment which later enabled her to see political affairs in a clearer light than the rest of the family.

Among so many other strands of family history here, Nike's analysis of the self-justification of Winifred Williams Wagner after the war stands out. She uses both the de-Nazification trial proceedings and the transcript of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's five-and-one-half hour filmed interview with Winifred, one sentence from which is more than sufficient: "If Hitler came in the door today, for example, I would be just as pleased and happy as ever to see him and to have him here, and the dark side of him, I know that it exists but for me it does not exist because I do not know that side." Nike's analysis of her grandmother's silence, of what is unspoken, and of the vigorous compartmentalization of her version of Hitler and everyone else's amounts to a devastating examination of verbal tics and habits. In Nike's words, "An immaculate self-portrait is shown to be a gigantic edifice of lies."

The struggle and battle since infancy between father and uncle—between Wieland and Wolfgang—understandably occupies the psychic center of the book. This is at times unbearably painful to read, since the

1 *The Wagners: The Dramas of a Musical Dynasty*, by Nike Wagner; Princeton University Press, 384 pages, $29.95.

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surviving (and supremely less talented) brother has been governing the fortunes of the festival since Wieland's death in 1966. Wagner's last grandson, Wolfgang, is now eighty-two years old and showing no signs of human frailty. In fact, he is said to be signing up singers and conductors for the 2008 season. Simply put, Nike gives us a portrait of the vengeful brother carefully carrying out a fratricidal operation against Wieland's innovations. Wolfgang's rage probably emerged in the thirties, when the "artist" and older Wagner grandson (Wieland) was exempted by Hitler from military service—the plodding Wolfgang, more adept at administration than anything else, was badly wounded on the Eastern front. Wolfgang's behavior toward and treatment of Wieland's family and the legacy of his historic productions only proves the point, a "getting even" that lasts to this day.

Difficult as it is to envision, the direction of the Bayreuth Festival will ultimately change hands. In 1973, a foundation was set up with the complete cooperation of the family, the province, and the federal government. This entity will choose the next director. (There are twenty-four votes on the nominating commission, of which the family has only five.) Many candidates are already jockeying for position, and it is clear that the present volume is Nike Wagner's presentation of her credentials for the directorship. Indeed, the final chapter is entitled "1990–2000, The Battle for Succession," and on page 310 we see a paragraph beginning with "My plan for the restructuring of the Festival . . ." All sympathetic readers can only wish her luck. At this writing, however, Nike's aspirations may have already come to naught. In the Spring of 2001, the Wagner Foundation tried to force the resignation of Wolfgang Wagner in favor of his daughter, Eva Wagner-Pasquier, who has had considerable administrative experience at Covent Garden, the Bastille Opera, and the Metropolitan Opera. It must be kept in mind that the foundation has total power over the functioning of the house (the Wagner family no longer has any say except through their votes in the foundation) and the whole of Richard Wagner's Bayreuth is now a semi-public property, supported by government funds. Wolfgang, who insists that he has a lifetime contract, rejected the nomination of his daughter Eva, totally estranged as they are, and instead volunteered to step down in favor of his second wife, Gudrun, who would hold the post until their daughter Katharina attains her majority. This solution was rejected out of hand by the foundation.

Knowing the history of the "luxuriant dysfunctionality" typical of the family, it comes as no surprise that Eva informed *The Financial Times* that "My father has become a little dictator" and turned down the foundation's nomination. Nasty rhetoric is coming from all quarters. The exasperated Bavarian Minister for Culture, Hans Zehetmair, has described Wolfgang as "Rumpelstiltskin" and "an old goat" and has threatened to cancel all contracts "if a new generation is not allowed to take up the reins." At this summer's performances, a chorus of boos greeted Juergen Flimm's *Ring*, Placido Domingo resigned in a huff, and the Brünnhilde, Gabriele Schnaut, pulled out. A star conductor, Giuseppe Sinopoli, died unexpectedly, replaced by the competent Adam Fischer. Not without precedent, Bayreuth is in a crisis.

Wolfgang threatens legal action to retain his post, and he has many cards left to play. *The Guardian* reports that the young German director Christoph Schlingensief, who recently cast a group of neo-Nazis in a production of *Hamlet*, has a future at Bayreuth, as does the highly nationalistic young conductor Christian Thielemann. It has been noted that since a new *Ring* is now in the works for 2006, a new director might not affect things in any substantial fashion until 2013.

Fifty-thousand tickets are issued each season, and the waiting list indicates that, if you apply without further delay, tickets are available for the Summer of 2008.

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The media

Came the farce of worryism

by James Bowman

"You know things really are getting back to normal when cable news networks break into Osama bin Laden coverage to bring viewers a good old-fashioned car chase," wrote Lisa de Moraes in *The Washington Post* of November 8. Actually, it was a truck chase—or the chasing of a truck by police cars in Dallas-Fort Worth: a stolen tractor-trailer with a load of lumber that had caught fire. The local Fox News affiliate sent its helicopter up to film it in spite of the FAA's ban on news helicopters within a twenty-two-mile radius of major metropolitan airports. In any case, the helicopter in Dallas wouldn't have been much use for reporting on Mr. bin Laden, who has been remarkably stingy with the sort of visuals that most viewers in the greater Dallas-Fort Worth area are at all likely to want to see.

Not to disagree with Miss de Moraes, but on another page of the same day's paper, I thought I saw an even better sign of the return to normal: a headline reading "Television's Talking Heads Lack Female Voices." Like Fox News, *The Washington Post* was back to the really important things in *its* life. Paul Farhi's story complained that the on-air "experts" consulted by the network news teams about the war in Afghanistan included few women, so that unsophisticated viewers might suppose that "Almost all of the people who seem to know anything are men."

> Of the 98 weekend "public affairs" programs whose guest lists were published in this newspaper in the past month, only 12 included a female "expert." And that figure falls into the single digits when you exclude "To the Contrary With Bonnie Erbe," a PBS show begun 10 years ago to address the lack of women on such programs . . . . "It's not like there aren't any women out there," says Barbara Cochran, a former CBS News bureau chief who heads the Radio and Television News Directors Association. But, she says, "you just have to make it a goal to find them." News producers, she says, "need to spread [their] nets a little wider."

Silly us, I guess, for ever thinking that the world had changed on September 11th.

All the same, the media's return to applying its moral micrometer to every instance of gender imbalance was rather reassuring after nearly two months during which they had been canvassing every hypothetical instance of horrible death that could strike at any moment. After the tragedy of terrorism came the farce of worryism. As I write, anthrax has killed four people and non-fatally infected thirteen others. Could this measly sum of mayhem have been what the terrorists were intending? Yet for over a month they, or the worryists who succeeded them, had created a nation of nervous nellies, afraid to open their mail or get on an airplane, and browbeating their doctors for unnecessary prescriptions for Cipro. This time, the bad guys had hardly needed to

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exert themselves, let alone kill themselves. Of course, the press was, predictably, a big help.

For whoever it was that thought up the idea of sending little packets of anthrax germs through the mail to media and political folk of high visibility—or even low visibility, as in the case of the poor picture editor at *The Sun* who was the first victim—was either very lucky or someone too knowledgeable about the way the American conversation is carried on to have been living among Afghan tribesman for the last dozen years or so. There have as yet been no smallpox infections. No other national monuments have been blown up or even damaged. No suspension bridges or nuclear power plants have been hit by suicide bombers—nor by non-suicide bombers. No shopping malls or ports of entry have been attacked or water supplies poisoned. No terrorist with a nuclear weapon in a suitcase has yet blown up even himself. And yet all of these things have been endlessly worried over in the media. Under the circumstances, a handful of anthrax cases was quite enough to create something close to hysteria.

Typical of the media's response was that of Jim Hoagland, op-ed columnist for *The Washington Post*, who wrote that

> Americans may be confused; stupid they are not. They see the panic that pushes Health Secretary Tommy Thompson to rush forward to reassure them before he knows what is going on or that causes Attorney General John Ashcroft to cry out that he knows something awful is about to happen to the country but he can't tell the people how he knows it.

Well, Jim, what should Secretary Thompson have said before he knew what was going on? Nothing, perhaps? Or else that there was every reason to be alarmed? For better or worse, government officials are expected to pronounce on things all the time before they know what is going on. In such circumstances it is standard operating procedure to give the benefit of the doubt to reassurance. We had no reason for supposing that the first anthrax death was part of a massive terrorist push to kill Americans through the mail—as, indeed, it turned out not to be—and that was worth saying at the time.

As for Ashcroft's warnings about imminent but unspecified terrorist attacks, it seems to me that it is precisely the "stupid" who would expect him, as Hoagland apparently does, to compromise the government's sources of intelligence by telling people how he knows what he knows. I am of the party that thinks there should have been no warning, and, as it turns out, there was no need for it. But even if there had been, such a vague notification could hardly have been expected to have prevented any death or damage by increasing general vigilance. The chances of reducing vigilance by crying wolf were much greater. Unfortunately, it is because of the media that not relaying the warning—however vague, however likely to have been a deliberate decoy—appears not to have been an option for the attorney general. If something *had* happened, they would have called with one voice for his head.

Thus government officials were forced to waste their time "calming fears" raised largely by the media, or themselves issuing unnecessary warnings, because they were terrified of the tidal wave of bad publicity that would inevitably follow another terrorist incident about which they had some advance knowledge but did not warn people. But of course they have advance knowledge of hundreds of things that will never happen. And I have no doubt that al-Qaeda, knowing that their phone calls are being monitored, make sure they have advance knowledge of hundreds more. Who can pick from among this welter of possibilities the one that will actually come to pass? The next terrorist, or worryist, incident may already have happened anyway: perhaps it was the constant stream of unnecessary warnings that the enemies of this country and the media together ensured

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would dominate the national conversation during October and November.

Eventually, of course, people will get tired of putting themselves psychologically on guard against nonexistent threats—which is when there will be another real act of terrorism. And when this happens, I predict there will be no advance warning. Naturally, this will generate *more* bad publicity for the government.

"Public hysteria—the contagion of panic spread by rumor and false alarms—is more dangerous than the real problem," reported Don Oldenburg in *The Washington Post*, "and America is on the verge of it, mental health authorities say."

> Social psychologists who study crowd behavior have long known that beliefs, misinformation and fears can spread through a society the way a computer virus dominoes from one online system to the next.
>
> "Rumor is a function of ambiguity and importance," says Fredrick Koenig, a professor of social psychology at Tulane University who specializes in rumors. "Obviously this situation is important and critical. And the ambiguity is very big—we don't know who it is, where it's going to hit next or where it is coming from. The authorities don't seem to understand very much about it, so we're getting confusing messages. You have no structure in terms of answers: What to do? How should we react? What's going to happen next? When you have this kind of vagueness, you get rumor behavior."

Leaving aside for a moment the question of whether or not reports like this should be included in "rumor behavior," is there any actual informational content in this passage? Does anyone not know that rumor can spread quickly and can confuse and frighten people? Does Professor Koenig's comment add anything to that pre-existing knowledge? No and no and no, I should say.

But the point seems to be that *these* rumors are different. Michiko Kakutani wrote in *The New York Times* that

> Before Sept. 11, it was easy enough for anyone with a little common sense to shrug off the nuttier rumors and conspiracy theories that flourish on the Net—the Area 51 UFO warnings, the Jimmy Hoffa sightings, the Hale-Bopp comet fantasies of the Heaven's Gate cult—but these days, when things once thought unimaginable (the twin towers' being brought down by hijacked airplanes, anthrax turning up in the mail) have come to pass, it's harder to separate the hysterical from the plausible.

You can't help wondering if it is really true that Miss Kakutani can't tell the difference between a UFO sighting and a suicide bombing—it is possible—or if she just wants to rationalize the media's near-hysteria over the anthrax scare, which the media then projected onto a much less terrified public.

After all, the story was both exciting in itself—does horrible death lurk beneath the phone bill and the Land's End catalogue?—and an excuse for bashing the government, either for not doing enough or for doing too much. "The FBI's Oct. 11 alert that another terrorist attack was possible 'over the next several days' shot public anxiety through the roof with its vagueness," said another of Mr. Oldenburg's experts. Likewise, "the news that some 600 suspects had been detained helped to comfort a shellshocked public . . . but the added detail that 200 others were still at large did not." Professor Koenig concurs. "Public panic is spreading because communications from the government seem confused and inconsistent," he said. Chalsa Loo, a clinical psychologist, added a recommendation "that the administration not push the vigilance button incessantly, as it has done."

Meanwhile, the press itself has license to be as confused and inconsistent as it likes. On Wednesday, the *Post* reported that "U.S. officials said yesterday that a letter mailed in Pakistan to a U.S. consulate in the city of Lahore has tested positive for anthrax bacteria, providing possible evidence that the anthrax outbreak in the United States is of international rather than domestic origin."

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On Thursday the *Post* reported that "The State Department said yesterday that a letter mailed in Pakistan to the U.S. consulate in Lahore had tested negative for anthrax bacteria," helpfully adding for the benefit of the confused that "U.S. officials had said Tuesday that preliminary testing of the letter indicated it contained anthrax spores."

On Friday *The New York Times* reported on its investigation of the FBI's investigation of the anthrax attacks and confidently pronounced it wanting on the basis of the fact that, having questioned some of those who had been earlier questioned by agents, it found them doubtful about the quality of the questions they had been asked. The implication was clearly that the bumbling FBI was letting the terrorist ring slip through its fingers. The next day, the *Times* quietly buried the story, headlined in *The Washington Post*, that investigators had concluded that the anthrax-mailer was an "angry male loner" in the twenty-second paragraph of a story that headlined the opinion of investigators that there was likely to have been another letter in Washington besides the one sent to Senator Daschle. Reams of hysterical hypothesizing about mass deaths became silently inoperative.

Reporting on the war itself was also rather confusing. When it was less than three weeks old, Jim Hoagland was publicly referring to "the quagmire of Central Asia." Frank Rich used his increasingly "partisan" *New York Times* column (to use a favorite word of his own) to proclaim that the Taliban were "proving Viet-Cong-like in their intractability." Rich's column was headed "How to Lose a War" and blasted the administration for not pouring more resources into fighting "bioterrorism," which, for a couple of weeks anyway, to Mr. Rich anyway, looked like it might be a major offensive against this country by the same "intractable" Taliban. Rich also cited criticism of Bush from the right as evidence that the media was not infected by any "liberal" bias.

Thomas Ricks and Karen De Young wrote in *The Washington Post* that "Although there is little evidence—yet—that the U.S. approach is succeeding, officials at the Pentagon and the White House said yesterday that they are sticking with their original strategy. It isn't time to think about 'Plan B,' a senior administration official said, because the administration is still at the beginning of implementing 'Plan A.'" When you think about it, that really is pretty obvious, isn't it? But the application of journalistic scrutiny to every phase of the campaign naturally increases the demand for news, which really means for more or less dramatic change. Of *course* the Pentagon wasn't moving on to Plan B. But if it were, that would have been a real story. Failing that story, the next best thing is to print the denial that they are considering it.

Meanwhile, "outside the administration, experts on military affairs, foreign policy, and Afghanistan are beginning to worry more openly. It is clear that 'some of the upbeat, earlier assumptions have given way to more downbeat' assessments." The latter is, of course, always an easy story to get. In addition to Richard Holbrooke, the Clinton administration official (who might be supposed to have his own reasons for questioning the new administration's strategy) and an academic "expert," Robert Pape, Ricks and De Young cite the Pakistani president, General Musharraf, without any mention that he had very good domestic reasons for saying—as indeed, he had been saying since the bombing started—that "military action must be brought to an end as soon as possible."

Well, the job of journalists is to report things, and not the same things they reported yesterday ("American warplanes continued to pound the Taliban front lines today . . ."), so that constant testing of the waters for the slightest hint of change becomes their purpose in life. "Support Deepens for the Taliban, Refugees Report" writes Rajiv Chandrasekaran in *The Washington Post*. "U.S. Errors Fuel Sympathy." How did Rajiv get this story? Why, he hung around Quetta, Pakistan for a few hours

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and spoke to the refugees himself. "'The Americans said they would only target Osama bin Laden's bases,' said Abdul Mohammed, a shop owner who lives in the southern city of Kandahar, the Taliban's stronghold. 'But now they are killing ordinary Afghan people, so people think that the Afghan people are America's enemy, not just the Taliban and bin Laden.'"

Thank you, Abdul, for that immensely valuable piece of information, even though it can hardly be said to be surprising, coming from someone who has just been bombed out of his home. Yet out of such stuff comes that front-page headline to suggest that the war is going badly. The first law of war news is that, where there is no news, news must nevertheless be reported, which is what gives us Abdul Mohammed and a great many more like him.

At some level, the media always know the importance of the things they don't know. Elisabeth Bumiller and David E. Sanger pointed out in *The New York Times* that "if the war at home seems more fumbling and disorganized than the war in Afghanistan, there may be a simple explanation: Americans are watching each anthrax case live on television, where every contradictory story and bureaucratic misstep is on display, while they are getting the Pentagon's sanitized version of the unseen battles half a world away." But the *Times* editorialist didn't get the message, mistaking the difference in coverage for a difference in reality.

> America seems to be governed by two presidents. The George W. Bush who is commander in chief has been keeping the country united at a time when the war in Afghanistan has run into problems. But the George W. Bush running domestic policy is an entirely different person, less a leader than a narrowly focused politician. If America is to fight terrorism within its own borders and conquer the economic recession, the commander in chief is going to have to take control at home, too.

What the editorialist meant by "a narrowly focused politician" was that Bush was backing at the time the House Republicans' insistence that airport baggage screeners be hired by private contractors rather than the federal government, as the Democrats were insisting. As usual, it was Bush who was condemned for his partisanship—that is, for believing that it was in the national interest for the government to be able to fire the relatively unskilled baggage screeners without going through the elaborate processes required for firing federal employees—and not the Democrats who were blocking any efforts to compromise.

Bush's alleged "partisanship" thus became part of the received media opinion about how the war was going at home. So much so, indeed, that in its first notice on its website of the American Airlines crash in New York on November 12, and before there was any information beyond the bare news of the crash, the *Washington Post* wrote that

> The crash took place at a time of unprecedented sensitivity for the airline industry, which has been reeling since four commercial jets were hijacked and crashed on Sept. 11.
>
> The Senate unanimously passed a bill that would put all airline security in the hands of the federal government last month, but it was opposed by House GOP leaders who denounced it as an expansion of big government. They pushed through a rival bill, backed by President Bush, that would make the federal government responsible for airline security but would allow the president to hire either private or public employees to screen baggage. So far, Congress has not been able to reconcile the two bills, so nothing has passed.

Of course one wouldn't want to go so far as to assert the existence of anything like "the liberal media," would one?

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Verse chronicle

All over the map

by William Logan

Joseph Brodsky tried to write a poem every Christmas, concentrating the vanishing energies of the year on a day when even unbelievers may be forgiven a twinge of belief—that is what myths are for. *Nativity Poems* collects the nineteen poems he finished, of which more than half have never been translated into English.[1] Brodsky has been a difficult poet to bring over from Russian—the rhyming forms he favored have fewer and fewer masters in English, and the longer he lived in America the more cocksure he became in his adopted language. In his last books, he was translating without help and writing too many poems directly into English, in which he had a wooden ear as well as a wooden tongue. Poetry, unlike prose, is almost impossible to write in a language not mastered until adulthood.

Nativity Poems is the best book of Brodsky translations since *A Part of Speech* (1980), from which a few poems have been reprinted. It would be tempting to say that what is good in these translations isn't Brodsky and what is Brodsky isn't good (it would be tempting, but it wouldn't quite be true). Most poets would benefit from having Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Richard Wilbur, and Anthony Hecht render their poems in English—even if the poems were in English already. Heaney wears his Irish warmth like a badge of authority; Walcott is a master of scumbled image; and Wilbur and Hecht could make a list of telephone numbers look as classical as a Corinthian column. You might think such translations would be simply a version of Heaney, or Walcott, or Wilbur, or Hecht, but it's by just such supplements of personality that translation regains some of the losses incurred in the dark passage from one language to another. This is Brodsky through Heaney:

> (but in the cerulean thickening over the
> Infant
>
> no bell and no echo of bell: He hasn't yet
> earned it.)
> Imagine the Lord, for the first time, from
> darkness, and stranded
> immensely in distance, recognizing Himself
> in the Son
> of Man: homeless, going out to Himself in
> a homeless one.

The ending is as hard to swallow as a whole potato (you can see from the *en face* Russian text—a luxury—that in the last line Brodsky's syntax is more impacted and the wordplay more charged), but the rest has the quiet tremble of Heaney's domestic scenes.

Poetry is what gets lost in translation, as Frost said, but a shadowy portrait of Brodsky emerges when you subtract his trans-

1 *Nativity Poems*, by Joseph Brodsky; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 113 pages, $16.

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lators' quirks of style. Behind Heaney or Walcott lies Brodsky's way of pacing the landscape against the line, or moving from the sandy particular to the starry universal. A reader is more likely to find the range of the original when the translations are by different hands. (When Brodsky translated himself it sounded as if he'd been translated by committee—a committee of refrigerators).

The weaknesses of Brodsky's poems in English aren't always the translators' fault. You might blame Glyn Maxwell for the matey tone of "'There is no God. The earth's a mess.' 'Too right. I'll take up chicks, I guess,'" but you must condemn Brodsky, in the same translation, for the clumsy imagery (if not the grammar) of "Everyone . . ./ is really in essence a girl, a virgin/ keen to unite—like your slacks imagine/ a skirt out there to go running to." You might quarrel with Paul Muldoon over the hopped-up idiom of "those hotshot/ wise men . . . schlepping along with their groaning coffers,/ for all the little children in their carry cots," but only Brodsky, who translated himself (like a barber cutting his own hair), is responsible for this doggerel, with its ludicrous allusion to Frost:

> And staring up where no cloud drifts
> because your sock's devoid of gifts
> you'll understand this thrift: it fits
> your age; it's not a slight.
> It is too late for some breakthrough,
> for miracles, for Santa's crew.
> And suddenly you'll realize that you
> yourself are a gift outright.

A couple of Brodsky's self-translations are restrained when they could so often be grotesque, though a poet who in English can commit lines like "The star would resemble/ no other, because of its knack, at its nadir,/ for taking an alien for its neighbor" translates himself in peril of his mortal soul.

Brodsky was no Christian, or at least no churchgoer (he mockingly said he was a Calvinist), but you don't have to take on the beliefs of Christianity to be moved by the nativity and passion, myths that lie beneath the art of two millennia. (Even if the religion faded into nothingness, an end unlikely given the power of its fictions, there would be people who wept at the beauty of its art.) Brodsky, who liked to pass Christmas in Venice, that sinking monument to the decay of architecture and belief, saw with what magnificence a skeptic could contemplate centuries past—these poems express a fealty to the past without being enslaved by it. And there is, almost like frailty, the doubt beneath Brodsky's doubt—you sense he felt the myths might just possibly be true.

Too many of these nativity poems are not good, despite the subtle designs of their translators, but they have the advantage of at least sounding like poems, unlike so much of Brodsky's last work in English. (The poet's hot personality was not much advantage to the cold words left behind.) At times you hear something, not like a bell, but like the echo of a bell, of what this poet must sound like in Russian.

Eavan Boland's poems mix Irish charm with a dose of political blarney. The steamy, observant lines of *Against Love Poetry*[2] often have something cold and repellent beneath them:

> Hester Bateman made a marriage spoon
> And then subjected it to violence.
> Chased, beat it. Scarred it and marked it.
> All in the spirit of our darkest century.
>
> Far away from grapeshot and tar caps
> And the hedge schools and the music
> of sedition
> She is oblivious to she pours out
> And lets cool the sweet colonial metal.

Boland loves to use language against itself, to convict it of crimes it hardly knew it was committing. I admire the resource that drags the neutral terms of craft (*chasing,*

2 *Against Love Poetry*, by Eavan Boland; W. W. Norton, 53 pages, $21.

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beating) into the cruelties of the slave trade, that binds the simple fidelities of a marriage spoon into a "mediation/ Between oppression and love's remembrance." She's a confident rhetorician, one who never questions the bullying of her methods, and if you believe marriage is as simple as oppression, you'll love the simplicity of what she says.

Boland's politics may be commonplace in the halls of academe, but I'm sorry to find them in poems. As soon as you see the word *violence* or *colonial*, the creative possibility is over (when you see *colonial,* you know *empire* waits in the wings). Of course we should remember the human cost of the silver (as we should not ignore the cost of mining coltan for our cell phones), but the idea that marriage has much to do with persecution in the colonies is mortally suspect (the spoon would have marked their faithfulness no better if the couple had clawed silver from the ground themselves). It's very close to the argument that Jane Austen should be convicted for everything she *doesn't* say about slavery.

If you're against love poetry, whatever are you for? It's like being against mom or apple pie. You sense what Boland means —the conventions of love, and love poetry, can be iron fetters, though surely in poems like Sonnet 130 Shakespeare broke them long ago. A book against love poetry is defined by what it opposes (even if there's a touch of irony in the antagonism), so it's odd that after all her railing against convention, against the incarcerations of marriage, Boland collapses into the coziness of a love that chastens and redeems (though a poet who casts her marriage as "A Marriage for the Millennium" is asking for trouble).

It's not that these clean, well-written poems are political, it's that they glory in self-righteousness. When you know Boland's politics, you know what's coming: she doesn't telegraph her punches so much as hire Western Union by the hour. After a while you resent being treated like a child in the schoolroom, captive to the poet's self-satisfied opinions (shaped in the violence of Ireland though now practiced in California). Boland is so wide-eyed about politics she's deaf to the things her complacent outrage makes her say: "I did not find my womanhood in the servitudes of custom," or "they were both found dead./ Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history" (cold and hunger were probably enough).

And yet. And yet. Under the influence of Seamus Heaney, Boland has matured beyond the household trivia of her earlier work. At times she achieves Heaney's sense of a land darkened by human presence—the fallen world that surrounds and shapes the landscapes we see, and how we see them.

> Silence spreads slowly from these words
> to those ilex trees half in, half out
> of shadows falling on the shallow ford
> of the south bank beside Yellow island [*sic*]
>
> as twilight shows how this sweet corrosion
> begins to be complete: what we see
> is what the poem says:
> evening coming—cattle, cattle-shadows—
>
> and whin bushes and a change of weather
> about to change them all: what we
> see is how
> the place and the torment of the place are
> for this moment free of one another.

A poet who can write with such quiet confidence doesn't need the cant of politics to support her. Boland is still too susceptible to easy answers (and easier questions) —if there's an ax to grind, she's sure to grind it, and the deficit of humor is too often supplied by a surfeit of pretension. You wish she had an ounce of Heaney's quiet indecision, his ability to balance on the knife-edge of principle. Her Irish world is so full of shamrock stereotypes you're surprised her characters aren't armed with shillelaghs and hunted by leprechauns.

Maxine Kumin lives on the farm, where she owns the franchise to a certain sort of farm poem. You can't walk around her barnyard without stepping on one. *The*

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Long Marriage, her twelfth book of poems, is earnest, sensible, maternal, often composed in a barnyard prose that wishes it were poetry.[3] When she writes (sensibly, prosily) about bindweed, or potatoes, or thistle, you remember instead the baroque elegance of Wilbur's eggplant. When she writes (earnestly, maternally) about porcupines or horses or scavenger dogs, you recall the delicious flamboyance of Marianne Moore's pangolin. Kumin, perhaps like the good farmer she is, doesn't have much use for language that isn't serviceable—her poems are held together with baling wire, and her idea of a juicy idea is a meditation on home canning.

It's hard not to think of other poets when you read Kumin, because she's forever dragging them onto her property and into her poems. Wordsworth waits to go skinnydipping at the water hole and Hopkins lurks by the compost heap. When she travels, Rilke, Marianne Moore, and Henry Vaughan follow like bellhops, but their presence only reminds you that even homespun poetry requires a force beyond ordinary language. Kumin prefers the genial woolgathering that lapses into lecture at one end ("The animals have different enzymes/ from us. They can eat amanitas/ we die of") and diary jotting at the other. It was a sad day when free verse became the pursuit of prose by other means.

Like many farm poets, Kumin's full of mawkish notions about the land, a New Age farmer (she invites an "animal psychic" into her horse barn) masquerading as a granite Yankee like Frost. Even when she dresses up her language, the tone goes slightly rancid. She falls into ecstasy over the compost:

> from
> our spatterings and embarrassments—
> cat vomit, macerated mice,
> rotten squash, burst berries,
> a mare's placenta, failed melons,
> dog hair, hoof parings—arises
> a rapture of blackest humus.
> Dirt to top-dress, dig in. Dirt fit
> for the gardens of commoner and king.

It's disgusting, but disgusting because it's prettified by the arty alliteration, the calculated balance of phrases.

You have to love a poet not to laugh at a frontispiece that pictures her with her husband and their two dalmations, Gus and Claude (it's like being forced, at gunpoint, to look at the family album of perfect strangers). When Kumin writes of the scars left by cancer and a crippling accident, the poems are lurid as blood-spattered photographs:

> You can see the path of a forest fire
> that devoured one breast leaving
> the other shyly hanging in space,
> my still abundant hair whitening,
> my almost bald pubis still useful.

Still useful! What to a farmer is practical may seem tasteless to everyone else. You wish Swift or Rochester were here to advise Kumin how to make such observations sardonic. You couldn't ask for a poet more kind-hearted—her heart bleeds in all the right places. Her opinions about war (anti), mutilation (anti), the extinction of species (anti), capital punishment (anti), and starving children (anti) could have been bought wholesale, at a discount. She doesn't preach to the converted so much as try to sell her congregation hair shirts.

> And what of the big-headed stick-figured
> children naked
> in the doorways of Goma, Luanda, Juba,
> Les Hants
> or crouched in the dust of haphazard donkey-
> width tracks
> that connect the named and the nameless
> hamlets of Want?

The most moving poem in the book, however, is a Dinka boy's report of the effect of civil war on his village. It is reserved,

3 *The Long Marriage*, by Maxine Kumin; W. W. Norton, 116 pages, $21.

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terrifying, with dry touches about life in a refugee camp ("*I studied geography, read* Lord Jim*// and coached younger boys in basketball/ a game made for Dinkas*"). His quiet tragedy measures the banality of all the country mire Kumin is fond of. When he gets a pair of Nikes, it's a triumph.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in New Delhi and raised in Kashmir. A Muslim, he calls himself a Kasmiri-American, which suggests the tangled heritage to which he is heir. *Rooms Are Never Finished,* like his earlier books, straddles cultures west and east, Hindu and Muslim, its English like a Persian miniature: fabulous, delicate (even finicky), alien.[4] (It is no surprise that Ali has been drawn to the most glittery, jewel-like American poet of the past half-century, James Merrill.)

The cultures of India are strange to us, uncomfortably strange—they remain outside the influences of our tradition, despite rogue notes like Schopenhauer's nirvana or the end of *The Waste Land*. An immersion in the Indian subcontinent (as opposed to Renaissance Italy) has never been the mark of sophisticated education, though Western scholars over long centuries have devoted their lives to its bazaar of literatures and religions. Ali's poems are attractive in their very exoticism, and his formal ambition gains the advantage of Western forms like terza rima and the canzone as well as Eastern forms like the ghazal and pantoum.

This new book opens with a long elegy for Ali's mother, whose body he brought from America home to Kashmir, a province half-destroyed by war.

> All the flames have severed themselves from
> candles,
> darkened Kashmir's shrines to go find their
> lost one,
> burning God the Moth in stray blasphemy.
> His
> Wings have caught fire,
> lit up broken idols in temples, on whom
> Scripture breaks, breaks down to confess
> His violence:
> what their breaking's cost the forsaken nation
> that now awaits her
>
> at the wind- and water-stretched end of
> Earth—to
> which, veiled, she's being brought back from
> Goodbye's other
> sky, the God-stretched end of the blue,
> returning
> as the Belovéd [*sic*].

Ali is a charming, capable, even whimsical poet (his excursions into the war in Kashmir are never convincing—his touch is for lyric and lament), but his poems seem slightly out of focus, descending into phrases barely acquainted with each other, often sentimental or silly (*Goodbye's other sky*?). His lines drift into the ether, a tendency exaggerated by his preference for forms that require repetition. (Even Merrill, a poet of incandescent formal gifts, seemed adrift in the canzone.) Ali has been instrumental in renewing interest in the ghazal, but results have been mixed.

> In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles.
> You learn your strange fate: You were exiled
> by exiles.
>
> One opens the heart to list unborn galaxies.
> Don't shut that folder when Earth is filed
> by exiles.
>
> Before Night passes over the wheat of Egypt,
> let stones be leavened, the bread torn wild
> by exiles.

The knotted internal rhymes, the monotonous falling rhythm, the postcard images (which sound wrenched from Indian pop songs) are lovely but empty, and those "unborn galaxies" are the stuff of greeting cards signed by weeping scientists. There have been fashions in poetic forms (recall the sonnet-mad 1590s), and even a gradual succession: in the past century we have seen the

4 *Rooms Are Never Finished*, by Agha Shahid Ali; W. W. Norton, 107 pages, $22.

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sestina become the poor man's sonnet, the villanelle the poor man's sestina, and the pantoum (just in the past decade) the poor man's villanelle. In each case strict meter has gradually broken down into free verse, the rhymes or endwords become laggard and elective. (There are triumphs of formal evasion, like Bishop's villanelle "One Art," but far more misses than hits.) Too often in recent poetry the demands of form exceed the poet's invention.

Some of the difficulties of *Rooms Are Never Finished* (and, admittedly, some of its shy pleasure) come from a poet not wholly at home in English, subject to slightly awkward syntax ("as her/ shrine is onto Srinagar's tarmac lowered") or idiom ("Kashmir would soon be in literal/ flames"), or to small errors of usage ("rpms" for "rpm"; "Belovéd," repeatedly, for "Belovèd"). Ali has brought into English verse a culture rarely seen there (contemporary fiction has a far livelier Anglo-Indian strain). It's a pity that his recent books have ignored the America he once rendered, like de Tocqueville, with a foreign intelligence—the exoticism works both ways. The fragile beauty of his lines conceals a poet whose skills have yet to match his ambitions.

When a writer abandons his homeland, or it abandons him, he must remake himself in the motley of exile, or night and day resist the seductions of foreign landscape. Ovid was of course the most famous intransigent (there were few attractions on the Black Sea), Nabokov and Conrad the most famous chameleons. In *Landscape with Chainsaw*, a witty title (with a wittier dust jacket, showing Grant Wood's famous version of Washington chopping down the cherry tree), James Lasdun tries to come to terms with losing Britain and gaining America.[5]

Lasdun, who is better known for his short stories, has an almost childish delight in words (when he doesn't stumble across the words he wants, he makes them up, like *unnibbleable* or *mammaly*). A writer so word-drunk finds it hard to suit subjects to his style—it's easy to seem frivolous, a Dylan Thomas without the benefit of alcohol or the excuse of being Welsh. Lasdun's style has calmed down since his jazzy poetic debut, *A Jump Start* (1987), but his attentions to language can still be hyperkinetic:

> Stripmall country: the chain
> molecule of a shingled cinderblock cube
> polymerised into HoJo's, Jiffy Lube,
> Walmart, Kmart, and—where we're headed
> —Miron:
>
> Museum of the American Present,
> where can-do meets do-it-yourself,
> where you can grab a dump-truck off the shelf
> or a family-size nuclear power plant.

This is not to fill every rift with ore but to stuff it with junk food—the satire has bloated beyond the bearing of wit. Lasdun's America is a paradise of brand names, an Eden where Adam would be responsible for product placement. If manufacturers paid poets for endorsements (a British writer recently wrote a novel commissioned by Bulgari), Lasdun would be rich—he's so taken with the perfume of name brands he can hardly shut up about them.

Lasdun's gifts have developed in a style drawn heavily from *Life Studies* (which judged an America whose symptoms it exhibited), though he lacks Lowell's killer instinct, his pressure on the condition of the spirit (Lowell licensed the use of brand names in his wonderful line "Tamed by *Miltown,* we lie on Mother's bed"). Lasdun is a genial bloke, inclined to be bullied—when his wife gives him the chainsaw that features in many of the poems, it scares the hell out of him, but he can't quite force himself to return it (the salesman makes him an offer he can't refuse). It's hard to like a character so feckless (the British have a stronger word, *gormless*)—let's face it, he's a prat. A poet plays the fool at his own risk—the risk is the

5 *Landscape with Chainsaw*, by James Lasdun; W. W. Norton, 80 pages, $21.

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loss first of the reader's sympathy, then of his patience. When Lasdun writes Lowell pastiche, he's just another Lowell wannabe, but at times he recasts the style (where Lowell's language bore down on his rhythm) for a new century.

> The mirror was oval like her face.
> Almond eyes, the blue-black curls
> an equivocal admirer
> once plied his fingers through
> wistfully, before letting go.
>
> Outside, hedgerows glittered;
> rosehips, ripening cobnuts,
> stitched in like silk as if the county
> had slid from a palace wall and settled there.
> *Why do I long to be here when I am here?*

Alert to the richness of words but not overwhelmed by them, the lines edge toward revelations more unsettling than the pangs of consumer culture. (Like many an émigré, Lasdun makes minor errors about his adopted home. It's worth mentioning that Owsley, not Owlsley, was the famous manufacturer of LSD; that the corporation styles itself Wal-Mart, not Walmart; that Ken Kesey's group was the Merry Pranksters, not the Yippies; and that Jimi Hendrix played, not a left-handed Stratocaster, but a right-handed one upside-down.)

There are far too many precious and unnecessary poems in this book (Lasdun is a poet who should never be happy, because it makes him slightly stupid), but half a dozen are a joy in their intellectual seriousness, their sensuous love of words, their cool unstitching of place. I'd include "The Apostate," "Hops," "Bluestone," and two remarkable short poems, "Chainsaw" I and II. Lasdun doesn't know what sort of poet he wants to be, and some of his thrashing around—this is his third book, and in each he's had problems settling into style—reflects a long crisis in poetic identity. At his best, exile or not, he is among the strongest young poets in America.

W. H. Auden long ago reversed the European pilgrimage of American modernists. Lasdun is part of a remarkable diaspora of British and Irish poets, many of them drawn to American universities over the past two decades. The new group of émigrés, little different from other economic immigrants, includes Geoffrey Hill, Paul Muldoon, Eavan Boland, Glyn Maxwell, Dick Davis, Eamon Grennan, and part-time visitors like Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison, and Michael Hofmann. That these poets, here in our midst, have had so little effect on American poetry indicts the sorry parochialism of our verse.

Czeslaw Milosz wrote *A Treatise on Poetry* nearly half a century ago, in the backwash of the war that almost destroyed his country.[6] In this complex meditation on Poland and Polish poetry, the poet grapples—at the climax, weirdly, wonderfully, in the backwoods of Pennsylvania—with his own compromised relation to his art. You can feel the influence of *The Waste Land* (there are objective correlatives scattered like candy), though Milosz, attempting to write the history of a sensibility, has his long eye on *The Prelude*.

The treatise opens during *la belle époque,* in a Kraków all Romantic manners and Symbolist cafés:

> Cabbies were dozing by St. Mary's tower.
> Kraków was tiny as a painted egg
> Just taken from a pot of dye on Easter.
> In their black capes poets strolled the streets.
> Nobody remembers their names today,
> And yet their hands were real once,
> And their cufflinks gleamed above a table.
> An *Ober* brings the paper on a stick.

The history of Poland is, in Milosz's version, bound to its poets; this may be self-delusion, though American poets so used to being ignored can hardly imagine a culture in which a broadside of poetry can be threatening as a broadside of cannon. The dead Polish poets whose names mean little

6 *A Treatise on Poetry*, by Czeslaw Milosz; Ecco Press, 125 pages, $23.

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to us (and would mean nothing but for long and informative notes) created the milieu into which Milosz was born. *A Treatise on Poetry* is, like *The Waste Land,* an invention of the past that must collaborate with its notes (notes as long as the poem itself). Like a mule train, they bear the provisions for lines that have galloped ahead.

The treatise (called *Traktat poetycki* in Polish) shifts to Warsaw, a down-at-heels capital at the end of one war that lay in ruins at the end of the next.

> You, alien city on a dusty plain,
> Under the cupola of the Orthodox cathedral,
> Your music was the fifes of regiments,
> The Cavalry Guard was your soldier
> of soldiers,
> From a droshky rings a lewd Caucasian ditty.
> Thus one should begin an ode to
> you, Warsaw,
> To your grief and debauchery and misery.
> A street vendor, hands clumsy with cold,
> Measures out a peck of sunflower seeds.

The verse is too sepia-toned and sensuous to make debauchery convincing, the lines sometimes just a mess of glowing detail (often transformed to symbol in the notes). Milosz argues, with pride and sorrow, that in each age the poets failed not their country but their poetry. In the library of the past, he sees the temptations to which other poets succumbed—the pure poetry, the propaganda—and records their lonely and sometimes heroic deaths. (Milosz makes himself seem not heir to a tradition, but the result of inevitable Hegelian necessity.)

In the final section the poet floats in a rowboat on a lake in Pennsylvania, waiting for a beaver, a totemic animal of his childhood that represents the wildness of another land, another history, a life outside history. He gets only a brief glimpse of the beaver, but cannot remain in the artifice of nature, or in America—he must return to the harsher world of petty diplomacy, to a poetry that names names. (It is a mild irony that Milosz, a diplomat, later went into exile in Paris and then America.) This last section suggests the torment of a poet out of tune with his time. Milosz is a Polish patriot—in the notes, you hear about the Nazi liquidation of the Polish intelligentsia and the Russian massacre of Polish officers in the Katyn Forest, but nothing about the Poles who collaborated in the Holocaust (he often excuses Poland as a special case).

Milosz has been an émigré so long he has outlived the country he left and become an immutable part of its past. Poets love to write treatises about poetry, but Milosz can offer nothing like the sophistication (or sophistry) of Horace or Pope—the philosophy buried in his notes is innocent guff (it's one thing for Keats to write "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," another for Milosz to opine—there's a lot of opining here—that poetry "is wrested from the world not by negating the things of the world, but by respecting them more than we respect aesthetic values. That is the condition for creating valid beauty"). He leaps into platitudes as into a warm pool—to write poetry, we're told, you need a) a classical education, and b) forests and streams. A pedestrian ode against City and Society, far too much like the propaganda he scorns, might have been written by a troop of young Communists.

Reviewing translations is a mug's game. If you don't know the original tongue, the translator is too often a used-car salesman, offering goods gleaming on the surface but dodgy underneath—you have to take the poetry on trust. Milosz has had the aid of his long-time translator, the gifted Robert Hass, whose love of image and ease with idiom are reflected in a poem whose lines seem natural in their borrowed tongue. Hass has used a relaxed, even indolent pentameter to adopt the strict unrhymed syllabics of the original. In *A Treatise on Poetry*, Milosz and Hass have made what is so difficult, a beautiful poem in English that wasn't written in English.

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Books

W. G. Sebald: the past is another country

by Tess Lewis

How strange it is, to be standing leaning against the current of time.
—W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*

Travel, Kierkegaard claimed, is the best way to avoid despair. But for the German writer W. G. Sebald, it leads, as often as not, from one state of despair to another. In his first novel, *Vertigo* (1990),[1] translated two years ago, Sebald's lightly fictionalized alter ego explains that "In October 1980 I travelled from England, where I had then been living for nearly twenty-five years in a country which was almost always under grey skies, to Vienna, hoping that a change of place would help me get over a particularly difficult period in my life." Yet without his routines of work in his garden or with his books, he finds himself at a loss. During ten days of compulsive walking, he is incapable of moving outside a precisely defined sickle-shaped area. The narrator begins hallucinating; he sees Dante walking ahead of him, then figures from his childhood. He escapes to Venice where, preoccupied by the "ever widening and contracting circles" of his thoughts, he is again temporarily incapacitated before fleeing to Verona, then on to Riva.

A similar, if not the same, narrator, in Sebald's third novel, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), seeks release through a journey. "In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work." But on his pilgrimage he is traumatized by traces of destruction, both recent and ancient. A year to the day from the beginning of his journey, he is immobilized with horror and hospitalized.

Yet travel, in Sebald's writing, does prove more than a panacea—however self-defeating—for existential crises. It also offers occasions for elaborate historical, literary, even metaphysical speculation. In the first section of *Vertigo*, entitled "Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet," the narrator retraces the steps of Marie-Henri Beyle (before he became Stendhal or Henry Brulard or any of a hundred pseudonyms) through Italy during and after the Napoleonic campaigns. In the third section, "Dr. K. Takes the Waters at Riva," he follows Kafka's 1913 trip from Vienna to a spa on Lake Garda. Sebald uses the opportunity to present the two men's various theories of love. Stendhal, chronically prone to infatuation, compares the growth of love and its necessary illusions to the crystallization of salt upon a twig, which, when interred for a time in a salt mine, will glitter as if covered with diamonds. Another theory offered is that of Mme Gherardi, Stendhal's traveling companion in *On Love* and probably a figment of his imagination. Mme Gherardi, according to Stendhal—in

1 Sebald's first three novels are available from New Directions, beautifully translated by Michael Hulse.

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Sebald's version—puts little faith in love. She believes it is a chimaera created by the civilized mind and a solipsistic "passion that pays its debts in coin of its own minting." Dr. K., as Sebald refers to Kafka, echoing the slipperiness of Stendhal's and his own literary identity, evolves what Sebald describes as a "fragmentary theory of disembodied love, in which there is no difference between intimacy and disengagement." Embodied love is inevitably false, for all lovers—Dr. K. himself included—are compelled by desire to recall the image of the lover with "the whole gamut of variations and repetitions" until it is extinguished under the strain.

The theme of love appears in a muted, indirect fashion in the second and fourth sections of *Vertigo*, "All 'estero" (Abroad) and "Ritorno in Patria" (Return to the Homeland). We are led to believe discreetly, through allusions, that the despair the narrator is trying to evade has been caused by complications of the heart. Center stage in these sections are fictionalized events from Sebald's travels and his past, such as an amusing encounter with the Italian police after a hotel receptionist mislays his passport and his return after an absence of three decades to his childhood village "W." in the Alps. As he revisits the sites and figures of his past, some of his childhood memories are demystified and others made more mysterious.

Kafka's story "The Hunter Gracchus" provides a unifying theme for *Vertigo*. In this story, the Hunter Gracchus falls to his death in the Black Forest while chasing a chamois. He eagerly boards the boat that is to ferry him to the shores beyond, but the helmsman is briefly distracted and fails to make the crossing. Now Gracchus is fated to sail the world forever, accompanied by a flock of pigeons. Occasionally, Gracchus will be carried ashore on a bier, his body draped with a flowered shawl, as in the story's opening in Riva. He always sets sail again, however. "My boat has no rudder," Gracchus concludes, "it is driven by the wind that blows in the deepest regions of death."

Elements from this metaphysical horror story fill *Vertigo*. Sebald has Stendhal and Mme Gherardi witness the docking of an old boat with a fractured mast and dirty yellow sails in Riva.[2] Two men descend carrying a bier with a body under a flower-patterned cloth. In Verona, the narrator stops in a pizzeria whose proprietor's name is Cadavero. Outside this pizzeria, which is complete with a flock of pigeons on its balcony, he experiences a hallucinatory vision of a bier with a corpse under a floral-patterned drape. In "W.," in an attic he was forbidden to enter as a child, he finds the dusty uniform of an Austrian *chasseur* from the early nineteenth century. He also recalls an incident from his childhood in which the body of a local hunter, Hans Schlag, is brought into town on a sled after he died in a fall to the bottom of a ravine. In this instance the figure of Schlag not only echoes Gracchus, but is subjected to a further aestheticization as the Sebaldian narrator incorporates elements from a story by Adalbert Stifter—a fatal fall into a ravine, a lapdog who survives the fall but is driven insane and shot by the rescuers, a doctor's verdict that the cause of death was exposure and not the actual fall—into his presumably autobiographical narrative.

Any description of Sebald's writing is bound to make it sound disjointed and overcrowded. He is, however, able to weave a multitude of apparently disparate strands into elegant, unified tapestries. There are nonetheless lapses. His explication of Gracchus's fate in conjunction with Dr. K.'s theory of disembodied love and the cryptic nature of guilt in Kafka's fiction is forced. Sebald offers his reading in a passage of a density that is unusual even by his standards.

The question of who is to blame for this un-

2 The description of the boat that inspired "The Hunter Gracchus" appears in Kafka's diary and not in the story itself. But Sebald is nothing if not thorough in gathering his sources. He even provides a blurry but convincing picture of the phantom barque in his text.

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> doubtedly great misfortune remains unresolved, as indeed does the matter of what his guilt, the cause of his misfortune, consists in. But, as it was Dr. K. who conjured up this tale, it seems to me the meaning of Gracchus the huntsman's ceaseless journey lies in a penitence for a longing for love, such as invariably besets Dr. K., as he explains in one of his countless *Fledermaus*-letters to Felice, precisely at the point where there is seemingly, and in the natural and lawful order of things, nothing to be enjoyed.

This interpretation is, in the context of the book, thematically expedient and aesthetically pleasing but not entirely convincing. Yet such lapses are infrequent and for the most part highlight the mastery of the rest of his writing.

The most celebrated and accessible of Sebald's early fiction is *The Emigrants* (1992). Although he relates the fates of four exiles buffeted by the forces of history in a much more conventional fashion, Sebald's search for traces of their lives is presented within a network of echoes and coincidences no less effective for its greater subtlety. *The Rings of Saturn* is the most Sebaldian of the three novels in its dance of associations and complex interweaving of themes. Portraits of Thomas Browne, the seventeenth-century essayist obsessed with "patterns which recur in the seemingly infinite diversity of forms," Joseph Conrad, Swinburne, Edward Fitzgerald, the English poet and translator Michael Hamburger, and the Dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi, among others, are bound together by meditations on the development of the silkworm industry, the natural history of the herring, King Leopold's savage reign in the Belgian Congo, the rapaciousness of the rising bourgeoisie, and the decline of great country mansions. And, of course, there are discreet, elusive scenes from Sebald's own life.

Sebald has received almost unanimous, ecstatic praise for his intriguing fictional hybrids. He has effectively created a new genre by combining travelogue, biography, memoir, speculation, literary criticism, and erudite detail into an elaborate structure founded on the restless sensibility of a melancholic aesthete. André Aciman, whose own brand of nostalgia runs in a more saccharine vein, perhaps captures it best with his term *essai noir*. Sebald punctuates his precise, elegant prose with grainy black-and-white photographs of people, details from paintings, pages from diaries, train tickets, receipts, and documents, many of which are tainted with a faint air of dubious authenticity. These illustrations simultaneously reinforce and undermine the narrator's credibility.

In all three of his early fictional works a narrator who shares the author's name and, like Sebald, was born in Bavaria in 1944 but left for England in his twenties where he lives to this day, embarks on a journey. He is ostensibly searching for traces of people he has known or read about, or even simply in search of peace of mind. In truth, however, each quest is undertaken for nothing less than metaphysical certainties.

They are hard to find, especially those of a higher order. In *Vertigo*, near the end of his journey, the narrator confesses to an equally saturnine former neighbor that

> over the years I had puzzled out a good deal in my own mind, but in spite of that, far from becoming clearer, things now appeared to me more incomprehensible than ever. The more images I gathered from the past, I said, the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling.

Faced with history, which "staggers blindly from one catastrophe to the next," the only certainty Sebald can establish is a variation of Nietzsche's eternal return that he calls the "phenomenon of apparent duplication." Instead of being condemned endlessly to repeat our past, we are continuously pursued by the "ghosts of repetition."

Sometimes these ghosts appear in human

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form, such as the identical twins who bear an uncanny resemblance to the young Kafka with whom Sebald shares a bus ride in Italy, or as Naegeli, the mountain guide whose body resurfaces seventy-two years after his death on a glacier and sixteen years after the guide's friend had described him to Sebald. At other times they manifest themselves in coincidences of time and place such as the intersections of his life with that of Michael Hamburger, another German exile and a man and writer for whom Sebald has a particularly strong "elective affinity." Sebald finds it incomprehensible that he and his friend Michael, born twenty-two years apart, should have met the eccentric scholar Stanley Kerry in Manchester in 1944 and 1966, respectively, when each was twenty-two years old. Perpetually and eagerly unsettled by such overlapping of lives and times, Sebald remarks,

> No matter how often I tell myself that chance happenings of this kind occur far more often than we suspect, since we all move one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes, my rational mind is nonetheless unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency.

Prominent as they are, the patterns of recurrence, eerie similarities, and the obscure laws of coincidence are not the most important element in Sebald's writing, for the patterns are teasingly portentous but ultimately unfathomable. It is the act of remembering the dead, the recalling of things lost or destroyed that is most significant. For Sebald, as for Chateaubriand, a presiding spirit of *The Rings of Saturn*, "from the very outset, recapitulating the past can have only one end, the hour of deliverance." Whether or not this deliverance comes only with death, the dead are ever returning to guide those willing to follow.

Sebald's revenants are unsettling, but far worse than being haunted by history's ghosts is having them exorcised. The Holocaust's "poisonous canopy" overshadows his trilogy. Sebald evokes it continuously, both indirectly in his elegies of its victims and directly in his pursuit of the past. The narrator in *The Emigrants* notes with quiet horror, for example, that the upright citizens of small German towns with once thriving Jewish communities like Steinach "have difficulty remembering those who were once their neighbors and whose homes and property they appropriated." Yet the Sebaldian narrator is also repeatedly subject to mounting panic when faced with a more generalized sanitizing of the past. After several days in Steinach, he leaves abruptly because "the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up" were taking its toll on his sanity. In *Vertigo* he is disturbed by the suppression of history evident even in the landscape.

Sebald's latest novel, *Austerlitz*,[3] examines the corrosive effects of history's suppression on a more intimate level. Jacques Austerlitz has been haunted for decades by a past that had been erased just as effectively as modern Germany's. In 1939, at the age of four, he was sent on a Kindertransport from Prague to England. There he was adopted by a dour Welsh Calvinist minister and his wife, and renamed Dafydd Elias. He did not learn of his true name until he was fifteen, by which time his adoptive mother was dead and the minister, unable to cope without her, institutionalized. All the traces of his origins seemed to have vanished, until, in his late fifties, he overhears a radio interview of two women who were on a similar transport. The few memories their stories awaken offer him a crucial link in unearthing his family's fate.

In the novel a nameless—but familiarly Sebaldian—narrator recounts Austerlitz's odyssey into this past, which, once the trails he had pursued as a teenager proved dead-ends, he had strenuously avoided. Despite

3 *Austerlitz*, by W. G. Sebald, translated by Anthea Bell; Random House, 300 pages, $25.95.

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feelings of "wrenching inside [him], a kind of heartache which," he later realized, "was caused by the vortex of past time," he engaged in a constant "self-censorship of the mind," refusing to acknowledge anything that related to his personal past. "As far as I was concerned, the world ended in the late nineteenth century, I dared go no further than that." Thus, Austerlitz, almost inconceivably, as he himself admits, reached middle-age, a respected lecturer in a London institute of art history, having spent decades compiling his investigations into the history of bourgeois architecture and civilization, knowing next to nothing about "the conquest of Europe by the Germans and the slave state they set up." He eventually, painstakingly, reconstructs his parents' final years, up to his mother's deportation to Theresienstadt in 1944 and his father's internment in 1942 in the French camp of Gurs.

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald covers much the same intellectual territory as in his earlier novels: an anonymous, neurasthenic narrator who shares many biographical details with the author serves as a foil to reflect, with elaborate asides, the lives of history's victims. Yet, with its cohesive story line, *Austerlitz* is the least obtrusively constructed and the most emotionally powerful of his four novels. Austerlitz himself is a complex and convincing character, and less of a pawn in the illuminating, but highly cerebral literary chess games of Sebald's earlier fiction.

The fascinating digressions in *Austerlitz* serve, within the more cohesive context of this book, more effectively as metaphors for the human condition than do his earlier fictional diversions. The narrator expounds, for example, theories of fortification from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, the increasing complexity of which culminated in the star-shaped fortresses of Neuf-Brisach and Breendonk. Such fortresses, almost always obsolete before they were completed, embody man's limited ability to learn from experience and illustrate the fact that it is "our mightiest projects that most obviously betray the degree of our insecurity." Sebald also portrays François Mitterand's new Bibliothèque Nationale in its Babylonian proportions and inefficiencies as hostile not just to readers, but to the books it is meant to preserve as well. It is nothing less than an "official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past."

This drive towards historical amnesia is evident everywhere, not only in architectural or cultural monstrosities but also in the decreasing standards of contemporary art and scholarship. We ignore the dead at our peril. Sebald's fiction is not merely an intricately ordered collection of fragments shored against our ruin—though it is beautifully and hauntingly that. Most importantly, it is Sebald's own "historical metaphysic," in which he brings the past to light as an effort to prevent it repeating itself either as tragedy or as farce.

Sebald has not confined himself to the realm of fiction. In 1997 he delivered a controversial series of lectures in Zürich entitled "Luftkrieg und Literatur"[4] in which he discussed, with excerpts from his fiction, the deep scars left on the psyches of even those, like himself, who were not direct witnesses to the horror of the Second World War. He also claimed that, despite all their efforts to come to terms with the past, the Germans have become "a people remarkably blind to history and lacking in tradition." The Holocaust is not the German people's only crippling historical legacy. The "true state of utter material and moral devastation in which the entire country found itself" at the end of the war was treated as a "shameful family secret marked with such a powerful taboo, that one could probably not even acknowledge it to oneself." Even in the 1950s, when Sebald moved from the alpine village of Wertach to the city of Sonthofen nineteen kilometers away, nothing seemed more appropriate to

4 Sebald published an expanded version of these lectures under the same title in 1999. The translations from *Luftkrieg und Literatur* are mine.

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him than the ruin-filled lots amongst the rows of houses. For ever since a trip to Munich, he explains, "nothing was so closely associated with the word *city* as mountains of rubble, fire-scorched walls and empty windows frames through which one could see the open sky." The circumstances of this destruction were never openly discussed, and for most of his childhood Sebald felt that some secret was being kept from him "at home, in school, and even by the German writers [he] read in the hope of learning more about the horrors in the background of [his] own life."

Sebald found that most historical studies and autobiographical accounts of the bombing raids recounted the complete devastation of Germany's major cities and many of its minor ones only in the most general and superficial terms, if at all. The major postwar writers, the Group 47 and the inner émigrés, were more intent on justifying their decision to stay in Germany throughout the war and on shaping their images for future generations. Only a handful of writers, most notably Heinrich Büll in *The Silent Angel*, attempted to describe this society that lay in ruins and was "morally as good as discredited." Yet even Büll's novel, though written in the late 1940s, was not published for almost five decades.

There are a few autobiographical works that do attempt to express, frankly and directly, a reality that defies the imagination. Sebald cites passages from the diary of Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen, who was sent to Dachau for subversive comments shortly before the end of the war. Reck-Malleczewen describes how refugees from Hamburg in July, 1943 clad only in pajamas, wandered about aimlessly in a state of utter confusion and amnesia. Reck-Malleczewen also writes about an incident he witnessed a month later when a group of forty or fifty Hamburg refugees tried to storm a train in a station in northern Bavaria.

> A cardboard box fell onto the platform and broke open, spilling its contents: toys, a manicure set, singed linen. Finally, the corpse of a child, completely charred, shrivelled like a mummy, which this half-demented woman had carried with her as the meager remains of a past, which, only a few days earlier, had been intact.

"Never truly captured into words," the horror of those years and its suppression will continue to work its effects, indirectly, insidiously, on the generations born after the war. The clamor raised for and against Sebald's diagnosis led to the rediscovery of a novel by Gert Ledig entitled *Retribution*. Its singularity, of course, supports Sebald's rule. Sebald is careful not to imply that the survivors have any obligation to describe their experiences and recognizes their "unassailable right to silence." He compares their trauma to that of the survivors of Hiroshima who, according to Kenzaburo Oe's *Hiroshima Notes* (1995), were still unable to speak of the explosion twenty years later. With every passing year, there is even less chance a work will be written that will adequately describe and so defuse this particular ghost of Germany's history.

The past is another country, and it is always Sebald's true destination. His geographical sites, however picturesque or fraught with significant correspondences, are merely gateways into a past that is most likely absurd and appalling. Out of his despair, Sebald has created a kind of refuge. We can find comfort in the beauty of his prose, but before long we, too, feel on our backs the wind from the deepest regions of death.

Proust before Proust

Joachim Neugroschel, translator
Marcel Proust:
The Complete Short Stories.
Cooper Square Press, 201 pages, $25.95

reviewed by Renee Winegarten

When, in 1896, Marcel Proust published his first book, he was twenty-five. It was a

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disparate collection of tales, prose poems, verses, portraits, and satires, some written at least five years earlier, entitled *Les Plaisirs et les jours*. This is the work (with the addition of a few items of juvenilia) newly translated and now offered to the public as Proust's *Complete Short Stories*. Given the mixed nature of the contents, this title seems an approximation: the stories are there, but so are other things.

Les Plaisirs et les jours did not make much of an impression when it appeared, though it was not for want of the author's attempts to publicize it. Through the good offices of Mme Arman de Caillavet, the Egeria of Anatole France, then regarded as one of the leading writers of the age, Proust solicited a preface from the great man (a preface said to have been written in part by the lady herself). A well-known salon hostess and painter, Madeleine Lemaire, supplied watercolor illustrations, to which were added four musical pieces by his friend, the composer Reynaldo Hahn. Proust even fought a duel with Jean Lorrain, after that fashionable man of letters and notorious gossip published some disparaging remarks about the book that Proust considered personally insulting. Duels, occasionally fatal, were quite common then among littérateurs.

Moreover, at thirteen francs fifty instead of the usual three, *Pleasures and Days* was virtually priced out of the market. Some felt that all this over-decorating of a small cake meant that Proust was just a dilettante who had failed to fulfil the promise that his friends had bruited abroad. Léon Blum, not yet the famous political figure that he was to become, but a talented literary critic, reviewed the book in the *Revue Blanche* with some severity. He recognized the author's gifts of thought and style but he called it "too self-conscious and pretty." As for the Catholic novelist François Mauriac, who has left a shattering picture of Proust in his last years, immured in his cork-lined room, he admitted that it was not until he read Proust's preface to his translation of Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, a translation published in 1906, that he realized he was in the presence of an astounding innovatory literary figure.

Indeed, it was not until 1932, ten years after Proust's death, that André Gide—who differed from Proust on the literary treatment of "uranism" and who had notoriously rejected *Un Amour de Swann* when it was submitted for publication—recognized the important place of *Les Plaisirs et les jours* in Proust's oeuvre. The early compilation had been reprinted for the first time in 1921, after Proust won the Goncourt prize for *A l'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* in 1919. It is worth remembering that by 1932 the whole of *A la Recherche du temps perdu* had appeared in print, the last three sections having been published posthumously. The astonishing architecture of the mighty work, deliberately constructed like some great Gothic cathedral, was now apparent. With the benefit of hindsight, Gide could say that with *Les Plaisirs et les jours* Proust offers us a foretaste of "everything we will come to admire in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*." That included the use of the leitmotif. (Wagnerism was flourishing in France in the 1890s when Proust wrote *Pleasures and Days*, and he was a great admirer of *Parsifal*.) The early work was like a prophecy, an "annunciation" of the abundance to come, said Gide. In his opinion, there were pages of "A Young Girl's Confession" that were equal to the best of Proust's writings. High praise indeed, when compared with Anatole France's earlier impression of "a hothouse atmosphere" among orchids of a sickly beauty—"sickly" being a word often used about the so-called Decadent literature of the period. But then Anatole France, the sceptical author of *The Gods Are Athirst*, had not had the benefit of reading *A la Recherche du temps perdu* when he made his comments.

So the question is: who is now likely to enjoy this new and accomplished translation of *Les Plaisirs et les jours* by Joachim Neugroschel? The answer must surely be those who have read *A la Recherche du temps perdu* in part if not in whole (for let us be

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realists here), and who are interested in anything produced by Proust that might shed light on him and his work, one of the greatest paeans to art in existence. With *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (together with the three volumes of the novel *Jean Santeuil*, written in 1896–1904, reconstructed from Proust's notes and published in 1952), the reader has access to some of his most enduring and memorable themes in embryo.

Among these is the vital and deeply resonant episode of the mother's bedtime kiss with its repercussions. Also to be found there is the first version of the little musical phrase that will become "*la phrase de Vinteuil*" (in "The Melancholy Summer of Mme de Breyves" it is drawn from Wagner's *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*). In that story, too, is the equation of love as suffering, the theme of obsessive self-destructive love for a person one hardly knows—or even likes. The details of paranoid jealousy—suffered by Proust himself—are already present. And so is the yielding to sensual pleasure and lust, but transposed from male to female in "A Young Girl's Confession." The girl's mother has a stroke when she discovers her daughter engaged in some nameless embrace, qualified as "the abominable act." There is the passionate love of flowers, to which the author devotes such concentrated attention, the profound feeling for the sea, the admiration for painters and painting, the whole treated in a fairly classical manner, mostly remote from Proust's often convoluted style in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.

In short, the young Proust is engaged in seeking his own voice as a writer. With characteristic wit Cocteau once described Proust's actual voice as being amused, hesitant, marked by a system of river locks, vestibules, courtesies—not so different, then, from his later authorial style. When *Pleasures and Days* was being written, young Proust, the well-to-do, solidly middle class half-Jew, was at the height of his period as a *fin de siècle* dandy always with a flower in his buttonhole, a man about town who enjoyed frequenting the upper crust, as captured in the famous portrait by Jacques-Emile Blanche.

Yet the incomparable observer with his gift for psychological penetration is already at work. There is his moral critique of snobs and snobbery in "Fragments of Commedia dell'Arte," and of the empty fashionable life of the aristocracy in "Violante or High Society." Proust's fascination with the links between the great aristocratic names and French history and literature is undermined by his remorse at wasting his time in social trivialities that he really despises. The moral influence of his beloved mother and grandmother pervades the book. For *Pleasures and Days*—with its epigraphs ascribed to the ascetic Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (for instance, "Have few dealings with young men and persons of the upper classes") as well as to Emerson at his most transcendental—seems far more overtly moral than *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, where the moral view is magisterially conveyed indirectly through satire. It is by oblique means, at once comic and appalling, that the cruel vanity of the Duc de Guermantes, his selfish indifference, and the hollowness of his pretensions to friendship are famously skewered forever, when he refuses to believe that his cousin is at the point of death because it would prevent him from attending a fancy dress ball with his wife. In the early tales we are given the moral standpoint, whereas in the later writings we have to work it out and savor it for ourselves.

Proust's contemporary readers with their classical education would have been fully aware of the irony in substituting "Pleasures" for "Works" when he adapted the title of *Works and Days* by Hesiod. With "Days" Proust retains the element of time that is central to his outlook. His delight in sensual pleasure in all its forms is intense, even if it occasionally carries a sense of corruption. Already the worm is in the bud of joy: the awareness of the ravages of time and the presence of death. The extraordinary long dedication to Willie Heath, a handsome young Englishman who resembled one of

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Van Dyck's romantically elegant cavaliers, broods, as it were, over the whole collection. Proust had first met him in the Bois de Boulogne, but their friendship was short-lived for Heath died in Paris in 1893 aged twenty-two. In the dedication, virtually an essay, Proust alludes to the way he himself suffered from asthma attacks that often confined him to bed from the age of nine. He almost anticipates his later self-claustration when he writes, "Noah could not have seen the world so clearly as from the ark, even though the ark was shut and the earth was shrouded in night." Proust might substitute pleasures for works, and complain (like his mother) about his lack of will power, but he was already working incessantly at least from the age of twenty towards his goal, still far off, in a triumph of the will over illness and suffering. Anyone who has ever glanced at a page of Proust's manuscript, full of corrections and insertions, will know how hard he worked at refining his art. He had already taken to heart Ruskin's injunction to work so long as there is still light. According to the dedication to Willie Heath, Proust had decided to "live in order to be worthy and deserving."

Perhaps with so allusive a text as *Pleasures and Days* it would have been helpful to the general reader to identify in brief footnotes a quotation from Racine or various luminaries of the age like Paul Desjardins and Maurice Barrès. The book contains Proust's early pastiche of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, but among the persons judged by the two foolish, floundering self-improvers there is no such person as Henri de Régné. Proust is alluding to Henri de Régnier (1864–1936), whose verse he quotes in an epigraph, presumably with approval of this now largely forgotten writer. Some critics once thought Henri de Régnier was the greatest poet of the Symbolist school, so it is a sign of the stupidity of Proust's Pécuchet that he dismisses this man of letters as a joker or a madman. In this misprint Proust would surely have relished yet another confirmation of his acute sense of the transience of pleasures and glories.

Prosecuting a war

Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke
War Diaries, 1939–1945.
University of California Press,
763 pages, $40

reviewed by Robert Messenger

In 1980, in his valedictory lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History, Hugh Trevor-Roper discussed the events of 1940, when the world hung in a balance between very different futures. Drawing attention to the fallacy of historical determinism and Marxist historiography, he observed that

> no one could rationally have assumed that at the precise moment of the fall of France there would be, in Britain, a statesman able to unite all parties, and the people, in the will and confidence to continue what could easily have been represented as a pointless struggle.

Trevor-Roper knows what our professors today seem to be too smart to grasp, that the "crisis does not always produce the man." In 1940, Winston Churchill stood between day and night. It was all the more remarkable that in late 1941 at another moment of great military crisis—Russia near defeat; Japan overrunning Malaya, Hong Kong, and Burma; the Germans victorious in North Africa and threatening Persia and Britain's irreplaceable oil supply—Britain produced the perfect complement to Churchill: General Sir Alan Brooke, the man who translated Churchill's genius into workable military strategy.

Alanbrooke (Brookie, as all his friends knew him, was created Viscount Alanbrooke in 1946) was an artilleryman from an old military family—the Brookes of Ulster sent twenty-six men to fight in the First World War and twenty-seven in the Second. He served with distinction on the Western Front—arriving as a captain in September 1914 and rising to GSO1 Royal Artillery. Between the wars, he continued his quick advancement showing an im-

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mense competence at staff work and at training soldiers. In 1939, he took command of one of the two corps that comprised the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and molded it over eight months into a formidable fighting force.

Alanbrooke was a true savior during the disastrous retreats in June 1940. He calmly maintained an organized front that—it still seems miraculous—kept the Germans in front and the beaches (and possible evacuation) behind. He was made commander-in-chief of the short-lived second BEF and then after the capitulation of France was given the impossible task of C-in-C Home Forces when every day brought the prospect of a German invasion that probably could not have been repelled. This threat passed with Germany's attack on Russia in June 1941, but when Alanbrooke became Chief of the Imperial General Staff—the operational commander of the whole British Army—in December, Britain seemed without hope.

This changed days later with America's entry into the war and led to a plan for German encirclement now called the "Mediterranean Strategy." The original vision seems to have been Churchill's, but Alanbrooke was the first to grasp its implications. Winning the campaign in North Africa would take the Germans off the offensive, return control of the Mediterranean, and free up a million tons of shipping per year. Then invade and knock out Italy, forcing Germany to commit divisions to southern Europe and the Balkans. Invade Fortress Europa only when Germany was on the defensive and unable to resist. It was a Grand Strategy in the mold of Marlborough and Wellington, and it was a grand success. Historians are always fond of connecting the absolutists: Louis XIV to Napoleon to Hitler. Their overweening ambitions and great power were defeated by British generals who understood what was at stake and then acted deliberately to bring the enemy low.

Alanbrooke was instrumental in convincing the United States to adopt this strategy. While the American admirals were only interested in fighting the Japanese and the Army chiefs were desperate to get to fighting the Nazis on the European continent, Alanbrooke insisted on North Africa. When Marshall said that the quickest way to end the war was to invade France in 1942, Alanbrooke's reply—not diplomatic but militarily correct—was "Yes, probably, but not the way we hope to finish it!"

Alanbrooke began his diary when he left England to take up command of II Corps of the BEF in September 1939. It was essentially a love letter to his wife and a reflection on his work, not events. From 1939 to December 1941, its keynote is the training of men and the general unpreparedness for war. Later, it is Alanbrooke's struggles with Churchill. Alanbrooke was a tough man whose characteristic response to statements he found objectionable was "I flatly disagree." Churchill wanted to micromanage the war, and he and Alanbrooke fought continually. In 1943, after a long day arguing with Churchill about his obsession with invading Sumatra, Alanbrooke got an invitation to dine:

> I thought it was to tell me that he couldn't stick my disagreements any longer and proposed to sack me! On the contrary we had a *tête-à-tête* dinner at which he was quite charming, as if he meant to make up for some of the rough passages of the day.

Earlier Alanbrooke had wistfully noted Marshall's reaction to Churchill:

> I remember being rather amused at Marshall's reactions to Winston's late hours, he was evidently not used to being kept out of his bed till the small hours of the morning and not enjoying it much! He certainly had a much easier time of it working with Roosevelt, he informed me that he frequently did not see him for a month or six weeks. I was fortunate if I did not see Winston for 6 hours.

Churchill and Alanbrooke nonetheless con-

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stituted a partnership of genius. Each had a method for dealing with the other: Churchill's was repetitive argument, Alanbrooke's is best summed up in the diary of his Director of Military Operations Major-General Sir John Kennedy,

> Later I realized the wisdom of the technique which Brooke acquired after many stormy passages with the Prime Minister. Brooke found it an invaluable rule never to tell Churchill more than was absolutely necessary. I remember him once scoring out nine-tenths of the draft of a minute to the Prime Minister, remarking as he did so, "The more you tell that man about the war, the more you hinder the winning of it."

Alanbrooke's diaries are full of good lines. Explaining his task to F. E. Morgan, who was planning what became the D-Day invasion, Alanbrooke summed up with "Well, there it is. It won't work, but you must bloody well make it." "Lunched with de Gaulle a most unattractive specimen. We made a horrid mistake when we decided to make use of him." On Anthony Eden:

> As a late S of S [secretary of state] for war he must know well what the army's situation is, and yet the proposals and suggestions he put forward might have been based on gross ignorance of the weakness of our defence of this country. If this is the best democracy can do it is high time we moved forward to some other form of government.

The diaries also give a very accurate picture of what it is actually like to be in strategic command of a modern war.

This is a book for anyone interested in the details of the prosecution of the Second World War. It is also a necessary corrective, since the earlier two-volume work based on the diaries by Arthur Bryant is both bowdlerized and out-of-date. There is a plaque in the floor of Westminster Abbey that reads "Remember Winston Churchill." Let us also remember Alanbrooke.

Defensor linguae

Françoise Waquet
Latin: Or the Empire of a Sign.
Verso, 346 pages, $30

reviewed by Gerald J. Russello

At the Jesuit high school in Manhattan that I attended, my freshman year, 1985, was the first in which Latin was no longer the language required for the first two years. Father Headmaster wrote to explain that the school nevertheless still strongly encouraged its young charges to take Latin, in keeping with Jesuit tradition and as an introduction to Western culture. Most of the entering class followed his advice, and we immersed ourselves, unselfconsciously for middle-class adolescents, in the campaigns of Caesar and the conjugations of irregular verbs. Without knowing exactly why, we had a sense that Latin still had something significant to say to us. Since that time, the situation has changed dramatically; such encouraging letters are no longer written, and Latin is much less emphasized.

We did not know then that we were part of a long intellectual tradition, now almost extinct, that had placed Latin at its center. Françoise Waquet, director of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, traces this tradition, as well as the possibilities of its revival, in her richly researched and delightful *Latin: Or the Empire of a Sign.* The subtitle should not frighten anyone concerned with the fate of "the old language," as the translation nicely puts it. Rather than a nod to chic French theory, Latin as the "empire of a sign" echoes the old French reactionary (and most definitely unchic) Joseph de Maistre, who defended Latin as the "*signe européen*" in his 1819 book *On the Pope.*

Waquet focuses on the Latin of the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, when its fate as a "dead language" was sealed. While Latin had been the common language of Europe since the Middle Ages, its role changed after the Renaissance and Refor-

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mation. On the one hand, its use as a common spoken tongue faded almost into insignificance; on the other, Latin expanded its cultural and intellectual place in both Catholic and Protestant Europe.

Waquet describes for us "a unitary intellectual Europe in which, until a relatively recent date, learning was expressed in Latin." And not only in science or literature, which were "nothing . . . compared to the enduring predominance of the old language in the schools and the Church: here childhood memories took over, and there came back to me the memory of a time—not so very long ago—when Latin was a part of people's lives." The influence of *Latinitas* extended from the Old World into the New. Most of the founders (but not all—the physician Benjamin Rush strongly opposed Latin education) thought the classical languages were essential to an informed citizenry, and Roman examples and imagery are staples of early American political culture. In institutions such as the Boston Latin School, the ideals of the Latin educational tradition were continued in America.

The watershed occurred, not surprisingly, in the 1960s. By the end of that decade, Latin was simply no longer considered valuable to Western intellectual life. Not because Latin or its study was out-of-date (of course, it had long since been replaced by the vernaculars), rather, "Latin disappeared because it no longer meant anything to the contemporary world." To the revolutionaries in those heady days, Latin represented all that needed to be overthrown: religion, history, tradition, a system of cultural symbols derided for their "ethnocentric" and "hierarchical" foundations. Echoing arguments used by Rush two centuries earlier, they simply saw no use for Latin. Almost without resistance, the language of Europe disappeared.

Waquet examines Latinity from a variety of historical, literary, and academic sources. The first part, "The European Sign," explores the "familiar world" Latin created. Drawing on Eamon Duffy's work on pre-Reformation England as well as historical research derived from Brittany and elsewhere, Waquet concludes that though formally unknown to the majority of the populace, Latin nevertheless was part of their quotidian lives. The book sheds light on an aspect of the history of the language that is almost incomprehensible in our ironic, postmodern world: simple loyalty to old forms and a deep respect for the power of words. When Latin was overthrown, a new world, and one not necessarily better, appeared: "[t]he disappearance of Latin meant more than the interruption of banal habits, the replacement of simple mechanisms; it disarranged a mental universe in which that unintelligible language had become fully domesticated." This is not a paean to ignorant peasants thumbing unintelligible breviaries: the data suggest, rather, that most of the uneducated in fact knew bits of Latin, from long use if not from formal education. And even for those who did not, Latin provided a background tradition, a "bass line" as Waquet calls it, that made the larger world comprehensible.

The second part, "Standards and Ability," looks with a sometimes sardonic eye on the actual quality of the Latin written, read, and spoken by pupils, scholars, and politicians over the last four centuries. The conclusions Waquet draws are not entirely favorable to those seeking a widespread reinstatement of Latin. According to available records, for example, in the eighteenth-century most students achieved only a basic proficiency. Even those who were supposed to be conversant in the old language, such as those submitting doctoral dissertations in Latin, in fact often lacked competence in the classical tongue. In this harsh verdict, Waquet reveals a bias toward "classical" Latin, in which the use of non-Ciceronian vocabulary or word order is considered a flaw. One implication of Waquet's research, however, is that a strict adherence to such a truncated classical model led to Latin's decline.

The final section, "What Latin Meant," expands the field to consider the cultural implications of adhering to a Latin-centered

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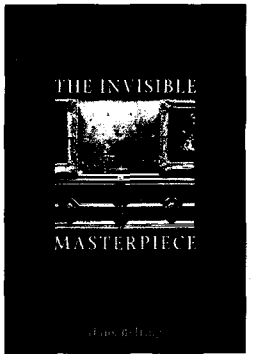

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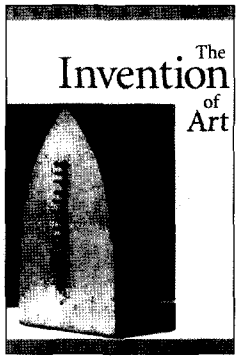

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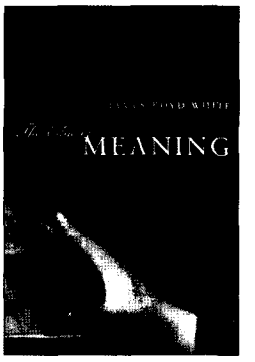

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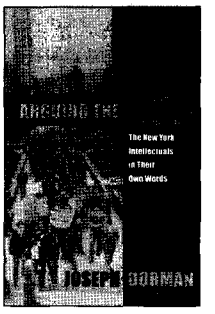

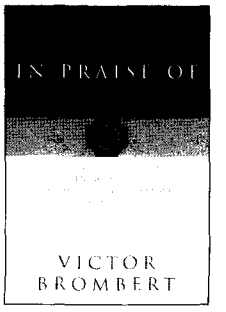

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curriculum, even when it had increasingly less practical utility. Why learn Latin if no one needs it anymore? By the late seventeenth century, the now familiar canon of arguments defending Latin had arisen: as background for the modern languages, as general cultivation of the mind, as the language of religion, as a mark of social class, or (as in my high school) as a way into Western culture. Taken together, the arguments contend that Latin releases us from what Eliot called the provinciality of time; the old language is both familiar and strange, and the combination is a fruitful source of intellectual reflection and cultural sophistication.

In its wide scope, *Latin* demonstrates that far from being a "dead" language Latin was rightfully considered a critical component of cultural life for the majority of the peoples whose cultures were heir to that of Rome, from Russia (in which there is now an academy teaching spoken and written Latin) to the United States. In light of the exhaustive detail Waquet provides on the vitality, importance, and sheer cultural weight of Latin in the modern period, comparison with the other "universal language," English, is instructive. English may be the language of international commerce and communication, but it is used almost exclusively as an instrument. It has never developed a broad system of cultural symbols like the one that made Latin the common and unifying language of the West. Waquet's somewhat harsh assessment of English's weaknesses may bear a residual trace of Gallic pride (one wonders at her reaction had French retained its status as the standard international and diplomatic language), but is nonetheless persuasive.

Waquet concludes with a call for a modest Latin revival in order to save it both from the pedants as well as from those who treat Latin as a subject for nostalgia or decoration. Waquet advocates creating a cadre of "professionals of humanist literary culture" who will concentrate on Latin as a subject in itself, in order to "have access to those wellsprings of our own culture, the Fathers of the Church and the *Corpus juris*" and the mass of medieval and early modern documents that have yet to be translated. While one hopes this may not be its ultimate end—one lesson of *Latin* is that the language should not remain the preserve of the academic class—with scholars of Waquet's generosity and ability, the old language might yet have a future.

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Notebook

Chelsea: galleries & garages

by Grace Glueck

There is a pathetic story of a man from Connecticut who, a few years ago, took his Porsche to be repaired in the Chelsea district of Manhattan, only to find that an art gallery—and a big one, too—had usurped the space where his garage had been. What's more, in the very spot where the jack-lift had raised his car for servicing, there stood a hefty installation by Tony Smith. The man was out of the loop. He hadn't realized that *his* Chelsea, a place of garages, repair shops for upscale autos, taxi gaseterias, tire fixers, and huge warehouses, was morphing into an art arena where modishly dressed art dealers, doers, and buyers rubbed elbows with grungy mechanics groping the innards of cars and trucks.

For about a decade now, Chelsea, located on the far West Side of Manhattan, stretching roughly from 13th to 30th Streets between Ninth Avenue and the West Side Highway, has been the "new" art district, a giant salesroom for contemporary work (as in SoHo, there are no purveyors of Old Masters there). And if the larger of the new galleries somewhat resemble auto showrooms, well, you can't say they don't reflect the neighborhood.

Chelsea is the latest in a long run of Manhattan art districts—districts that have included 57th Street and the upper Madison Avenue area, the short-lived East Village phenomenon of the early 1980s, and the loft-and-small-factory precincts of SoHo that now make up a high-rent shopping mall. Unlike SoHo, which grew organically as a dealers' venue because artists lived and worked there, the Chelsea scene has been imposed on an unprimed neighborhood by dealers who wanted to get away from the clownish weekend bustle that SoHo has become. Looking for better spaces at cheaper rents in idle old buildings, they have, for the most part, found them. Some 150 galleries now operate in Chelsea, most of them defectors from SoHo or uptown.

Actually, there are two Chelseas. One consists of a genteel West 20s residential section and the General Theological Seminary's early nineteenth-century campus at Ninth Avenue. The second Chelsea is the neighborhood's industrial edge, once the site of warehouses, lumber and rail yards, breweries, factories, and freight handlers; now it is the art mart.

The name Chelsea—given to the entire area in the mid-nineteenth century by Thomas Clarke, a retired British Army captain who owned a large farm there—evokes the residential quarter of West London that was once the stomping ground of writers and artists such as Jonathan Swift, Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. The ambiance of New York's Chelsea does not quite measure up to West London's, however.

Unlike SoHo (a name that, even though the result of city planners' jargon, reminds one of the arty English neighborhood),

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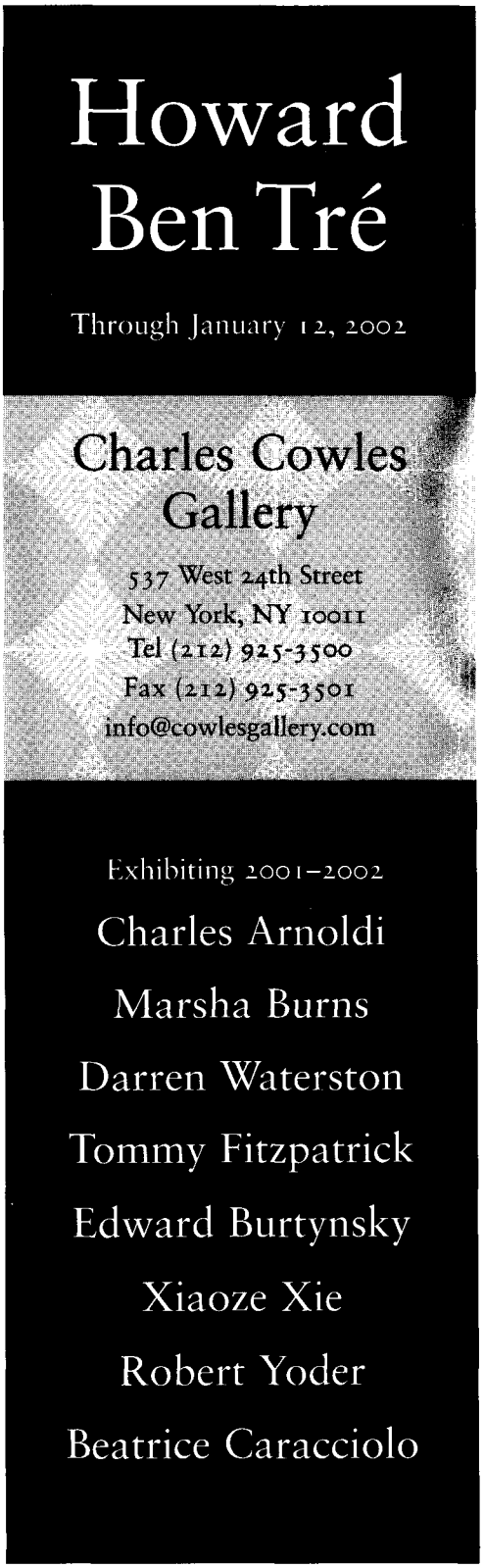

Chelsea has never been an haven for artists. (There are a few exceptions, among them Louise Bourgeois, ensconced for years in a residential brownstone.) The inhospitable blocks of the Chelsea art district are a muddle of monolithic buildings that swallow up the people who come to visit them, and whose façades—except for those now housing ground-floor galleries—offer no clue as to their purpose. Chelsea's lack of soul as an art neighborhood, its scarcity of feeding spots, and the fact that in winter it is the coldest place in the city, raked by sharp winds playing off the Hudson, do not encourage the kind of street life endemic to SoHo.

The pioneer Chelsea dealer is said to have been Larry Gagosian, who opened one of his many art venues on West 25th Street in 1985. But Chelsea hadn't ripened yet, and buyers kept their distance. He left, but is now back in an emporium a block away from his old spot. The real breakthrough was made in 1987 by the Dia Foundation (now the Dia Center for the Arts): it established an austere showcase in a refurbished four-story factory building on West 22nd Street. When I first saw it, I was struck by its Quaker meetinghouse-cum-factory plainness, a reverent setting for the art that Dia has always treated with nothing less than religious piety. (Dia's recently reinvigorated and extended lobby, resplendent with the sculptor Jorge Pardo's California colors, takes a big step toward breaching the churchy atmosphere and making the place more accessible.)

It took a few years, but—on a much more diminutive scale, of course—what Lincoln Center accomplished for the Upper West Side, Dia did for Chelsea. Dia's establishment as a visual arts presence in the neighborhood, along with the lure of cheaper space, helped establish a critical mass of dealers. Paula Cooper got there in 1996, and shortly thereafter Barbara Gladstone, with Matthew Marks and MetroPictures, bought a single-story garage 150 feet wide on West 24th Street. Smaller galleries then arrived

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from SoHo and Madison Avenue, acquiring spaces in warren-like buildings like the Starrett-Lehigh on West 26th Street, an humongous 1930s relic built to accommodate railroad boxcars—boxcars that could be hoisted up inside the building for delivery of their contents. (Quick to seize an opportunity, the owners of the building have now reinvented it as the Starrett-Lehigh Center for Creative Arts, Media, and Technology.)

The larger spaces, particularly the ground floor garages with truss-supported ceilings, offer the advantage of columnless floors, providing the display area necessary for the gargantuan proportions of artists' work today. But too often the space and its chic, factory-like architecture overwhelm the art, spoiling its cumulative effect and compromising the intimacy of individual works. Some of the larger galleries, moreover, have taken to putting their offices at a distance from the selling floor, a corporate practice that, while adding to display space, tends to isolate dealer and staff from the audience. Not that this withdrawal doesn't happen elsewhere; still, Chelsea seems to have exacerbated it. I can remember a time long ago when art dealers, like booksellers, actually seemed to enjoy walking the floor to chat up visitors and ply them, deep pockets or no, with a little sales patter.

Some dealers cite as beneficial to business Chelsea's very lack of ambiance, as well as its dearth of restaurants, retail stores, and subway stops. "The people who do get here are serious, not shoppers," mused one gallerist. "It's good that we're away from retail." What, I wondered, does he consider his own business? In the Madison and 57th Street areas, dealers are not heard complaining that the close presence of "retail" interferes with the sale of art.

But does the location of a gallery at all affect its sales? It's true that artists have been known to design installations or to arrange their paintings according to their dealers' spaces. And some dealers have specified the size, color, and themes of their artists' work, under the impression that once an artist develops a signature motif, repetition can only enhance his works' value. But the venue—downtown, uptown, under the Brooklyn Bridge—doesn't really matter. Would Jackson Pollock have painted differently if Peggy Guggenheim hadn't shown his art at her Kiesler-designed gallery on 57th Street? Did exposure in SoHo affect the materiality of Richard Serra's sculptures? The obvious answer is no.

Still, if I were an artist with a hot dealer in Chelsea, where the small seems to get lost, I think I would try very hard to expand my format. Art has been enlarging since the days of the Abstract Expressionists, to compete with movie screens, billboards, and, of course, other art. Big-thinking Chelsea pushes that trend. Here the survival of the fittest means the biggest wins out.

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Letters

Translating Octavio Paz

To the Editors:

Stephen Schwartz's review of my translation of Octavio Paz's *Itinerary* ("Liberated by America," February 2001) has only recently been drawn to my attention. His comments naturally reflect his taste, his literary ear, and his politics (whatever they may be), and twice he rightly corrects slips on my part. I also accept that the word "butt" has associations for American readers that it does not have for British readers or for myself. How he manages to call me "politically correct," however, as if I represent a strand of thinking in universities today, defeats me. But here goes. Had he consulted the British small-press edition, the first one, he would have seen that the title was simply *Itinerary.* It was the American edition that added "An Intellectual Journey," not the translator. I wasn't even consulted, though maybe Paz's widow gave the go-ahead. The subtitle clearly aims to explain, and surely betrays, an anxiety on the publisher's part that "Itinerary" on its own sounds too much like a tourist brochure. It's more a comment on potential readers, a hope for sales.

About Pablo Neruda, Schwartz hasn't read what I wrote closely enough, or followed Paz's own complex attitudes concerning the Chilean poet. I am criticized for "praising" Neruda for his crucial interventions about being "revolutionary and responsible," but Schwartz omits my historical point when I wrote "in the 1920s and 1930s," referring to a pre-CP Neruda much admired by Paz and most poets in Latin America and elsewhere. By 1945 Neruda (like Picasso) had worked out his politics, and he became the Stalinist who certainly was never praised by Paz (or by myself; I have complained in print of his "reams of didactic poetry").

My note on Retamar I thought was simply factual. I cannot see how Schwartz reads "dishonest praise" into it. I applied two adjectives: one was "influential" about Retamar's essay on Caliban, which it was (but that doesn't mean that I endorsed it, which I don't, as I find it skimpy and shallow), the second, "prestigious," about the magazine *Casa de las Américas,* which at one time was read all over Latin America; it has had many ups and downs, but an anthology of its first ten years, published in 1970, is as good a selection of Latin American writing as you can find, whatever your political agenda. In that sense it was "prestigious." Interestingly, in that 1970 Cuban anthology, Octavio Paz published his wonderful poem "*La higuera religiosa*" ("The religious fig tree"), written in India in 1965.

My last point concerning substance applies to the comment about my suppression of Hannah Arendt. The version I translated (acknowledged in the British edition), with Octavio Paz's permission and encouragement, was the shortened Barcelona edition of 1994, not the fuller Mexican one. This shorter version was corrected by Paz himself, and Arendt does not figure there.

Now to the impossible task of translating (Paz). My aim, always a risk, was not to translate Spanish literally by using the usual Latinate equivalents. Spanish is not English, and much literary translation suffers from what the two

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languages share as common roots. I wrote that I "have often shifted away from Latin cognates." Schwartz doesn't agree with my attempts, but he could have given my intentions a more sympathetic ear. That he doesn't is a projection (an unthinking one) of his own agenda. How well I know Mexican Spanish (or how well he knows Mexican Spanish) is not worth pursuing, but I don't know any translator who doesn't work from a dictionary, and if Schwartz found me too clever by more than half, I would answer that Paz's sinuous, thought-provoking, and idiosyncratic Spanish demands more than equivalences. After all, the point, I reiterate, is for Paz to speak through my English. Maybe Schwartz thought that he would have been a better translator (and should have been approached by Paz), a common fantasy among reviewers of translations.

Jason Wilson
University College, London

Stephen Schwartz replies

Jason Wilson's insulting exercise in academic bluffing is of a piece with the incompetence of his translation of Octavio Paz's *Itinerary*.

"Had [I] consulted the British small-press edition": reviews of new books in general-interest journals do not typically involve detailed research into the printing history of a text, and in this case there was no compelling reason for me to examine anything other than the American edition. In any event, translators usually retain control over the details of their version as it proceeds to actual printing, and Mr. Wilson's name, not that of Marie-José Paz, appears on the volume. His attempt to shift blame for a clunky subtitle to her is ungentlemanly to say the least.

About Pablo Neruda, Mr. Wilson engages in an appalling example of bad faith. Pablo Neruda was not known for writing about politics in the 1920s. Admiration for him among his Hispanic literary contemporaries was largely based on his early verse, which had nothing to do with revolution or responsibility therefor. Nevertheless, Neruda became an active Stalinist of a murderous persuasion quite a few years before 1945; in 1939–40, he worked on behalf of the Russian secret police to prevent anti-Stalinist Spanish Republicans from escaping the Nazis and to facilitate the assassination of Trotsky in Mexico. Incredibly, the translator of Paz's own comments about Neruda's role as a servant of Stalin in the latter affair and even earlier, in Republican Spain, is none other than . . . Jason Wilson! His memory is apparently as impaired as his ability as a Spanish translator.

I do not need to be reminded that in 1970 the Cuban government propaganda front *Casa de las Américas* was still considered prestigious by some Latin American writers, but thirty years have passed since then. Mr. Wilson's printed comment in adulation of this despicable institution and its commissar, Roberto Fernández Retamar, was written in the present, not the past, tense. And his comment was dishonest because while Paz criticized Fernández Retamar, Mr. Wilson defended him, contradicting his ethical duty as a translator to be loyal to the original author's spirit.

As to his claim about the missing reference to Hannah Arendt, again Mr. Wilson defends his incompetence by ducking behind the "small-press" English edition of the translation. So, are we to believe that an obscure British printing is to be considered more authoritative than the one sold in American bookstores, and an obscure Barcelona edition of the original (unavailable to me at the U.S. Library of Congress) is similarly more reliable than the standard Mexican edition? These excuses don't wash. Serious translators work from the latest, authorized edition.

Finally, this pompous academic defends his unsuitable translation by producing pretentious claims about Paz's work. Shifting away from Latin cognates might make some sense if Mr. Wilson were translating, say, from Anglo-Saxon, as did Pound. But Spanish is a Romance language, and more importantly Paz's prose style was deeply influenced by that of André Breton, who wrote in French. The idea that something other than equivalence is the aim of a translator reflects a fixation on superficial novelty. But Mr. Wilson's failure to comprehend how to create an English equivalent for Paz's text is aggravated by a grotesque subtext involving another equivalence: Mr. Wilson's obvious belief in himself as equal in genius to Paz, and therefore free to tinker with Paz's work according to his whims. Mr. Wilson is an ignoramus, as shown by his description of Paz's Spanish as "sinuous" and

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"idiosyncratic." Octavio Paz's prose was elaborate, reflecting the noted influence of Breton, but it was considerably lighter and clearer than that of his French mentor, and was seldom either "sinuous" or "idiosyncratic," descriptives much more applicable to the early poetry of Neruda. The writing of Octavio Paz was composed in a Spanish that was clearer, simpler, more direct, and less idiosyncratic than that of almost any other twentieth-century Spanish classic—excepting, perhaps, Juan Ramón Jiménez. That was, indeed, the greatest effect of Paz's experience with the Anglo-American modernist classics, his other outstanding influence.

The point is not to make Octavio Paz speak through the English of a nullity; it is to create an accurate English rendition of Paz's own voice. My review of *Itinerary* was necessarily brief and did not mention more than a dozen ridiculous editing and translation errors.

Correction

In William Jay Smith's review of Hannah Green's *Little Saint* ("Golden Spark, little saint," September 2000), the novelist and poet Richard Elman was mistakenly referred to as Richard Ellmann. It was the editors' mistake. We regret the error.

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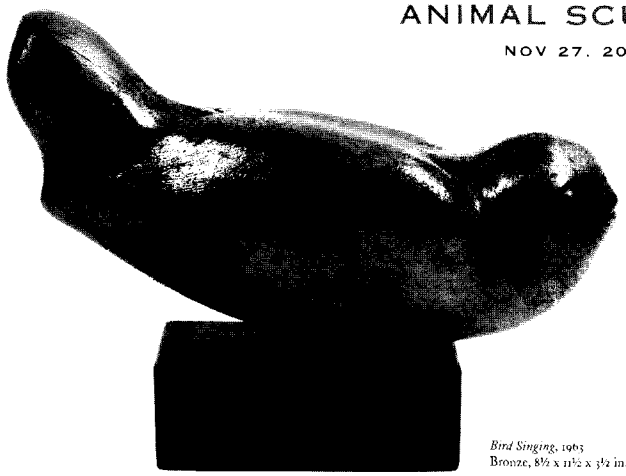

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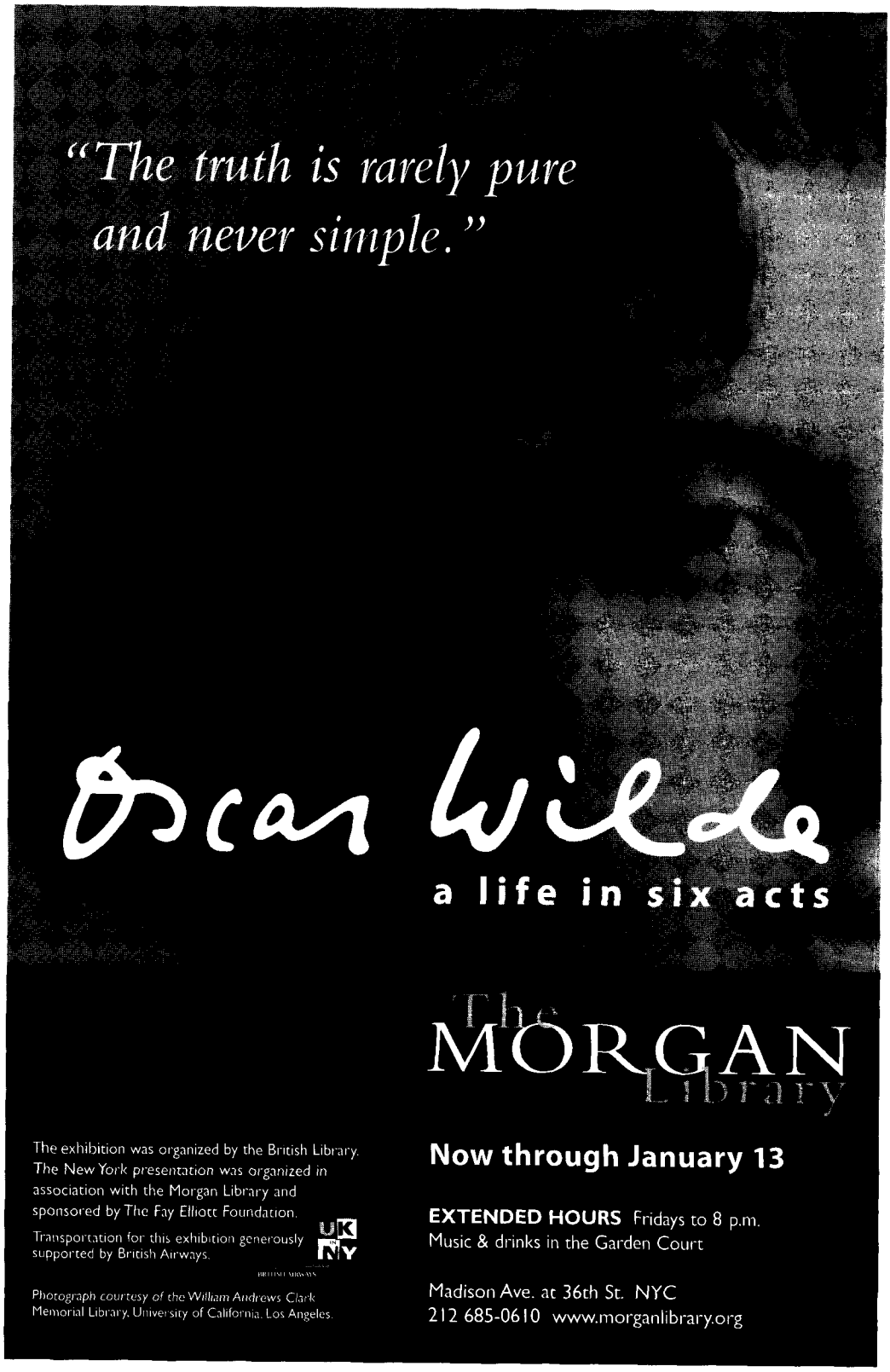
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